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Fantasy & Science Fiction

JANUARY

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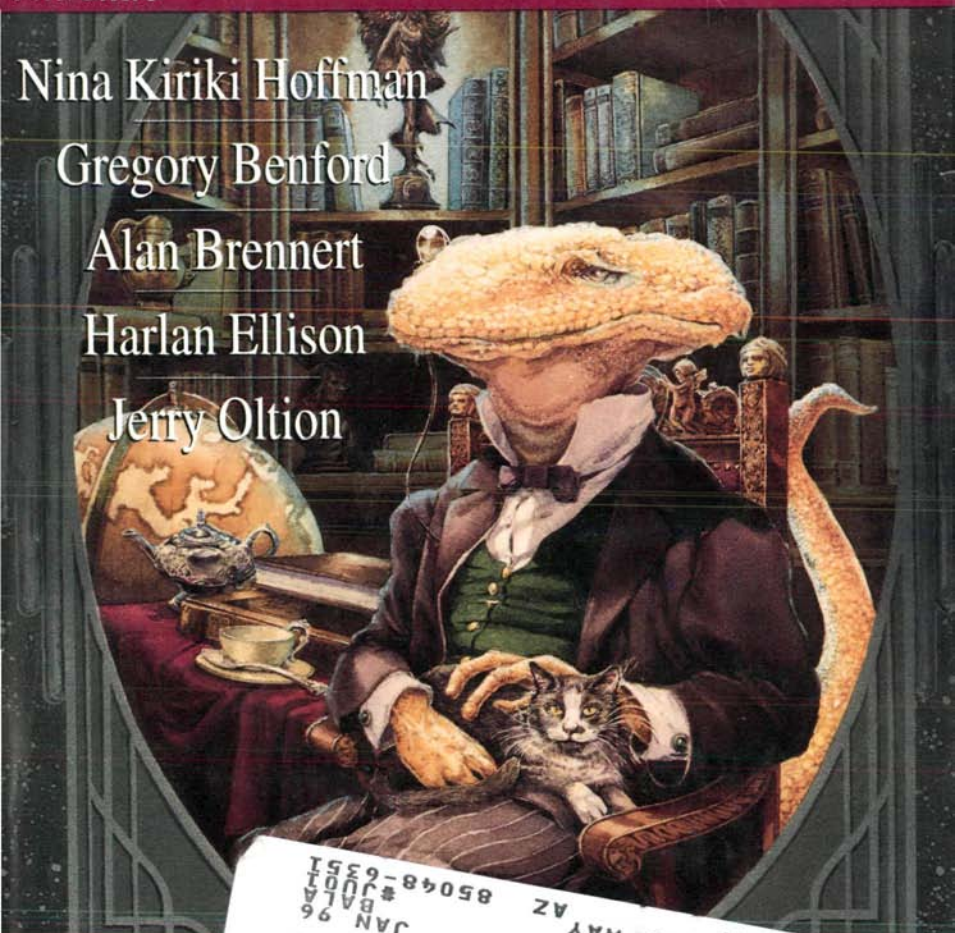

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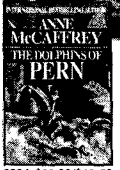

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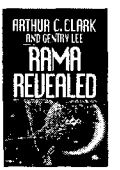

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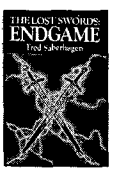

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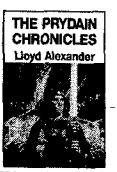

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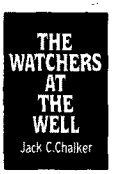

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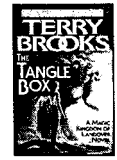

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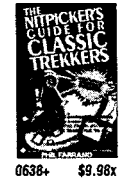

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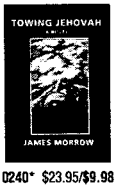

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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Editorial

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

THE HUMAN mind has an amazing ability to time travel. A scent, a thought, or a sound can send a person back to a moment decades in the past.

I had such a moment yesterday, when I received in the mail the first copy of *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction, A 45th Anniversary Anthology*. St. Martin's Press gave the cover the look of previous volumes, so that the book appears to be part of a set as well as something new. And as I held it, in the fading twilight outside the Depression-era post office in downtown Eugene, Oregon, I found myself — much younger — in the Jim Dan Hill Library on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Superior, holding my first Best from F&SF volume.

In those days, the reading room of the Jim Dan Hill library was poorly lit. Uncomfortable flat orange and green couches lined the walls. Often, I was the only person in the room — a girl waiting for her father to finish teaching his classes, and drive them both home. I would peruse the new books shelves and read until he arrived. I learned to read short fiction in that room because I was unable to check books out of that library, since I was not a student, and I was too young to buy my own card. I read the *Collected Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (and fell in love with "Bernice Bobs Her Hair," a story that spoke to my young soul), *Short Story Masterpieces*, edited by Robert Penn Warren, and the Orbit series edited by Damon Knight.

I read *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction* in that overheated room, squinting in the dim light, my back aching from the uncomfortable couch, and so fell in love with the fiction that I actually approached one of those scary librarians and asked permission to look for more editions in the stacks. She directed me to the card catalogue where I learned that the Jim Dan Hill

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Library had that one edition and that one edition only.

So the next Saturday, I rode my bike across town to the public library, there by the grace of Andrew Carnegie, and in the dusty sunlit stacks of that imposing building, I found more *Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction*, as well as all the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* volumes. I picked five books, because that was all I could fit into my bike basket, and rode home, never to be the same again.

Those books led me to the short story collections of Ray Bradbury, and his short stories led me to his novels, and his novels led me to the science fiction section of the library where my life-long interest was born.

Those memories, little reflected moments, recalled more by sensation than actual thought (the musty scent of old books, the fragile feel of the library's paperback copy of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the garish cover of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents Stories to Read With the Lights On*), ran through my mind in a split second, not even long enough for the twilight shadows to advance another inch across the sidewalk of the Depression-era post office. But with the memories came similar memories of the stories themselves: the tattooed man, Bernice's sense of freedom, the odd religion in "A Canticle for Leibowitz," (the long and short versions).

The stories that I read are as much a part of me as the things I have physically experienced. I realized, as I stood in yesterday's fading sunlight, that I have no idea which stories in the new *Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction* will leave a lasting impact on a little girl in the reading room of the local library, nor do I know as I write which story in this issue of the magazine readers will remember by this time next year. All I know is that fiction serves as form of telepathy between writer and reader, an idea which evokes in me the same kind of awe as the brain's ability to time travel.

Ed Ferman and I co-edited *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction: A 45th Anniversary Anthology*. We hope that those of you who haven't read the magazine until recently pick up a copy of the anthology to see where we have been in the past, and those of you who've been with us a while will pick up a copy to see if you agree with our selections. We chose the stories which spoke to us, just as we do when we edit the magazine: the new voices who tell of things we've never seen, and the fa-

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miliar voices who remind us of everything we love.

Maybe, when you hold the book, you'll remember where you acquired your love of short fiction — or maybe you'll create a new memory all your own. In any case, the arrival of the new *Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction*, gives us an opportunity to thank you for supporting us all this time. And we pledge to continue publishing the best fiction we can find, so that the telepathy, time travel, and enjoyment will continue, month after month, year after year.

F&SF WINS AWARDS

The magazine has won some significant awards recently, including the prestigious 1994 Hugo Award for Best Editor, which went to Kristine Kathryn Rusch. The award was presented at the Annual World Science Fiction Convention held in Winnipeg, Canada over Labor Day Weekend.

F&SF authors also won two Nebula awards, which are voted on by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. "Graves" by Joe Haldeman (Oct/Nov 1992) won for best short story, and "The Night We Buried Road Dog" by Jack Cady (January 1993) won best novella. "Graves" previously won a World Fantasy award (given in 1993). The Jack Cady novella also was presented with a Horror Writers of America Stoker Award at the annual meeting in Las Vegas.

—*Edward L. Ferman*

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This month's cover story, "Tea and Hamsters," features a forthright old lady who happens to be a favorite of author Michael Coney's. "She's appeared in many of my stories under different names," he writes. He also tells us that "Tea and Hamsters" is set in the same location as "Sophie's Spyglass" from our February 1993 issue.

Tea and Hamsters

By Michael Coney

MRS. MASTERSON'S CAT was subject to the occasional disappearance, but this time the old lady was pretty sure her new neighbor had eaten him.

She had mixed feelings on the matter. On the plus side, Tabitha was getting old and running up vet's bills. Like her husband Wally, Tabitha had outlived her usefulness. There comes a time of life when a woman needs to be alone, free from the constant irritation of men and cats underfoot, demanding food. Nature provides for that time, by ensuring that women live longer than men and cats. Yes, it would be good to have the cottage to herself again.

But on the minus side, it was intolerable that anyone should play fast and loose with her devoted companion of sixteen years. It was proof that the misfit next door could never become an acceptable member of human society. No matter what that pathetic do-gooder Anna Tyler said.

Mrs. Masterson was in a foul temper that morning due to a visiphone call she'd received during breakfast. Her husband Wally, far from dying, had had

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his application for parole turned down. He'd sat there blubbering onscreen, begging her to make a personal appeal to the Governor. Well, she wasn't going to. The law must take its course and Wally must pay the price for being caught out.

Wally was a weakling, always would be; and a diabetic to boot. A Space Admiral's daughter herself, she'd been deceived by his mustache, upright bearing and barking speech into thinking he was a man worthy of her mettle. Only later had she discovered that the mustache concealed a disfiguring birthmark, the bearing was due to a corrective truss, and as for the barking.... Well, sometimes she'd suspected he was a reject from genetic engineering, particularly when he responded to stress with a hangdog expression, a whimper and a shot of insulin.

She shuffled to the window, pausing only to turn the framed photo of Wally face to the wall. It did little for her standing in Foss Creek, having a husband jailed for embezzlement. Embezzlement! Of all the niggling, measly little crimes, reminiscent of nineteenth-century clerks on high stools fiddling the books with quills! Assault with a deadly weapon would have been better; at least it had some panache. And he'd had the nerve to say he did it for her, to buy her a place in the city.

Outside, rain dripped from bare branches. At the foot of the steep bank, the tidal inlet rippled gray and uninviting, the pleasure boats shrouded in wet tarpaulins. February in Foss Creek.

And that was another crime to lay at Wally's door. Why had he insisted they retire to this little tourist village, this moldering relic of days gone by? What was so good about rain and wind and dropouts making like old-time farmers? What was wrong with the clean domed cities of Earth that reminded her so much of her childhood at Sol Station 2?

Mrs. Masterson stared grimly at the cottage beyond the trees. Something was moving there. She seized her binoculars.

It was that *creature*, walking stark naked in the rain!

This was too much. She snatched up the visiphone and called Anna Tyler.

"Stay right where you are," she snarled. "I'm coming over. This time your scaly friend has gone too far!"

"This used to be a nice village," snapped Mrs. Masterson, conveniently

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forgetting her views on Foss Creek. "Friendly law-abiding folk, good community spirit, and now what? Pets disappearing, rampant nudity in broad daylight and God knows what going on under cover of darkness!"

Anna sighed. This dreadful old woman had been a problem ever since she'd moved Loo into Foss Creek. God knows, she'd chosen this backwater because of the low population density, but one Mrs. Masterson was worse than a city block full of bigots.

"Let me deal with your points one by one," she said tiredly. "First, Tabitha has simply taken off for a few days like cats do. For all you know, she may be back home at this very moment. Second, there's a big difference between Loo nude and a human nude, as well you know. And third, under cover of darkness Loo simply follows the dictates of his religion, just like some people go to church on Sunday."

Logic was not the best way to appeal to the old lady, however. "Be that as it may, I want that goddamned creature out of there!"

"That's very negative thinking. Do you mind if I make a suggestion? Why not show a bit of good neighborliness? Give him a taste of the human way of life."

"Invite that alien in for a sherry, you mean? Good God, woman!"

"Loo is not an alien, Mrs. Masterson. The word alien has negative connotations that give entirely the wrong impression of Dengal physical characteristics and culture. Loo is an environmentally challenged person."

"Person? He's a goddamned reptile! How can you call a reptile a person?"

"All intelligent beings are persons, as you should know. You spent most of your years off Earth, I believe?"

"Certainly I did. And if there's one thing it taught me, it's that aliens are slimy bastards. My father did not die for nothing, I assure you! And what's a grown woman like you doing keeping hamsters, anyway? Reverting to childhood?"

Ignoring the hamster question, Anna pointed out, "Your father was killed by the Choth. Loo is a member of the Dengal race."

"My father died in the line of duty, protecting Earth from such as this Loo, and no amount of hair-splitting can change that! And now we're supposed to welcome them with open arms, by God! You have a lot to learn about human nature, young woman!"

"I believe humans are generally kind and sympathetic people, whatever

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the evidence to the contrary," said Anna acidly, beginning to lose patience. "Loo and his people have not come to Earth as invaders, they've come as refugees. And yes, we should welcome them. Good grief, Mrs. Masterson, only one shipload of them survived! They've been through hell, their home planet is destroyed, and you want to turn them away?"

"Yes!" shouted the old lady. "Kick them back into space where they belong! And I tell you something else, young woman. I'm reporting you to my fellow Council members for harboring rodents, filthy things."

"You're talking about my hamsters?"

"Get rid of them, woman." A note of rough sympathy crept into the old lady's voice. "Find a good man and have children. Pets are no substitute; never have been, never will be. Believe me, I should know."

Anna didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or simply scream.

"Loo, I have to ask you this. You needn't answer if you don't want to. Did you eat Mrs. Masterson's Tabitha?"

"Tabitha?"

"It's a cat. A small feline."

Loo's puzzled expression cleared. Anna was getting good at reading his face, just as he was improving his imitation of human expressions. "I've eaten no cat," he said confidently. "She is accusing me of eating her cat?"

"That, and walking naked in the rain."

Loo scratched thoughtfully. A small cloud of scales drifted to the carpet. "I could have taken a shower instead. My skin dries out so fast in your climate. The rain seemed a good opportunity. But walking in the rain is frowned upon, on Earth?"

"Walking *naked* in the rain. No, forget the rain, it's a red herring. Walking naked where you can be seen. Think, Loo! How often have you seen humans naked?" It was tricky, explaining human behavior to an environmentally challenged person. "By human, I mean anyone of an age capable of reproduction. By naked, I mean so that the reproductive organs are clearly visible."

"I see them all the time, on the 3-V."

"No, Loo. Those are what we call dirty shows. They don't count. I mean how often have you see naked humans in socially acceptable — " No, that wouldn't work either. "Forget that. Anyway, take it from me, Loo, people

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don't like to see you naked. You want to fit in, don't you? Then keep your clothes on in public, for Pete's sake. And don't scratch like that. Scratching in public is frowned upon, too. Chimps scratch. You want humans to think of you as a person, don't you?"

"It's my dearest...wish."

His speech had become slow. Anna watched his eyelids droop. Loo was going torpid. It often happened during daylight hours; a penalty of his religion. Soon his breathing became deep and regular and quiet, apart from that loud and bubbly sniff at the end of each inhalation; a defense mechanism against poisonous gases on his home planet. It was a pity, but there was little that could be done about the sniff. Normally the only person to hear it would be another Dengal; but there might be times when Loo would unavoidably go torpid in human company. Maybe they should practice for such occasions. Maybe some kind of hypnotism might work; she'd heard it sometimes cured snoring.

It was going to be hard work, fitting Loo into human society.

"Tabitha? Tabbytabbytabby?"

It was no use. The goddamned cat wasn't coming back. Odd how one could miss such a perverse creature. Odd how she occasionally missed Wally too, against her better judgment. Mrs. Masterson sighed, shuffled toward the kitchen to brew herself a cup of coffee, then remembered the afternoon meeting.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED
to welcome our new friend
LOO
At the village hall on Friday, February 17 at 2:00 p.m.
Learn about worlds beyond the solar system! Hear about alternative customs and religions from Loo, our own real-life environmentally challenged person! Bring a friend! Sorry, no pets.
Refreshments

Yes, refreshments would consist of a big urn of coffee and homemade cookies; a chance to pig out at someone else's expense.

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The meeting was also a chance to get some uncomfortable facts out into the open. Mrs. Masterson enjoyed baring uncomfortable facts almost as much as Loo enjoyed baring his body to the rain. She glanced at her watch. One thirty-seven. Maybe she'd leave right away, to be sure of a seat in the front row.

She shuffled out to the covered way beside the cottage, and caught sight of her other neighbor, Megan Jenkins, in her garden. Megan was a good woman; a tractable woman who could easily be made to see sense. Megan would be a useful ally at the meeting.

But Megan was not interested. "Really, Rachel, I'm much happier not knowing about these things."

"Nonsense, woman! Here we have this monster living on our very doorstep and you have no wish to explore his weaknesses? You must come and swell the numbers of the dissenters. I insist!"

Megan eyed Mrs. Masterson's buggy unhappily, sighed and accepted the inevitable. "Please drive slowly, then. You know how nervous I am."

Mrs. Masterson snorted and took a plastic object of repulsive aspect from the glove compartment.

Megan uttered a little scream. "Oh, my God. What's that?"

"That, my good woman, is an artificial finger. It is a reproduction of my husband's right forefinger." She pressed the starter pad with it, the motor hummed into life and the buggy lifted from the ground. "The starter accepts his fingerprint, you see."

"Why not just press the pad yourself?"

The old lady scowled. "My husband has an irrational prejudice against my driving. He would not allow the pad to be programmed for me. I suppose he thinks he's being masterful, but actually his attitude is intolerably high-handed, and I fail to see the relevance of my prior driving record."

"But now he's, uh, *away*, he's had to concede?"

"Concede, nothing! I outwitted the fool. He's never been a man for planning ahead. One day he ran out of insulin and slipped into a diabetic coma. While waiting for the ambulopter I seized the opportunity to take a cast of his finger." Her good humor restored by the memory, she chuckled. "I can still see his face when I arrived in the buggy to collect him from hospital!"

Her cottage was one of three at the end of the lane which, at that point, degenerated into an overgrown trail leading to an ancient coastguard station.

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The lane, overhung with huge old trees, clung to the steep hillside above the inlet for about a mile before winding into the village. The drive was fraught with the possibility of plummeting into icy waters. The ground-effect buggy was quite unstable, so Mrs. Masterson usually drove with the guide wheels permanently down. She'd complained to the manufacturers often enough, but to no effect. Once they'd made the sale, they'd lost interest, the crooks.

Today the drive was uneventful and she parked outside the village hall in good time. A handful of people were already gathered around the coffee urn.

"Rachel!" One of the Council members, Elsie Stammers, greeted her excitedly. "Isn't this fun! To think that little old Foss Creek has been chosen as a home for this visitor from outer space!"

Mrs. Masterson eyed them sourly. The fools, all agog. The kind of people who'd lay out the red carpet if a 3-V star dropped by. City people were more sophisticated. God, how she wished someone would buy that cottage of hers! "I'm reserving my judgment," she said.

"Always the wet blanket," grunted Carl Steffen, the hobby farmer, turning back to the coffee urn.

Mrs. Masterson felt her anger build. "You don't have this strange creature living next door," she snapped.

He wheeled round. "I have fifty head of sheep and believe me, there's nothing so strange as sheep. The weird way they look at you, the stink, the suicidal tendencies. Sheep are congenitally insane. I hardly think one lizard living next door can compare. And I hear it's intelligent, too. Personally I'd be glad of the chance of sensible conversation, after nothing but baa, baa, baa all day long!"

"It's your choice to associate with such creatures." Mrs. Masterson drew herself a coffee, loaded a plate with cookies and made for the front row. Wally had never liked the Steffen man; occasionally Wally had shown good sense. Wally had, in fact, been quite terse with Steffen once or twice.

She slipped into a reverie — a frequent event these days — remembering the time Wally had refused to allow Steffen to drive his shampooed and beribboned sheep past the cottage door on the way to a village show, forcing him to detour across the muddy hillside. And rightly so. Good for Wally; but for him they'd have been knee-deep in sheep-dung.... She started, opening her eyes. Things were happening. The meeting must have commenced a few minutes ago.

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The reptile Loo sat next to Anna Tyler on the platform, his scaly tail emerging disgustingly from somewhere in his pants and resting coiled on the floor beneath his chair. He was dressed in a suit complete with shirt and tie. Mrs. Masterson snorted. He looked ridiculous. She glanced around at her neighbors, but they seemed to have accepted this grotesque sight.

Loo was speaking. "Thank you, Anna, and thank you all for being here, you wonderful people. Anna told me I might expect a warm welcome, and believe me Foss Creek is no less than Paradise after the rigors of space and the horrors of the quarantine — "

The Tyler woman cut him short. "Yes, no less than two hundred of Loo's people remain in conditions of comfortable isolation, awaiting the moment when they can take their place as productive members of society. Loo here might be described as an envoy, sent among us to study our ways — "

"Why us?" shouted Mrs. Masterson.

"It would be unfair to drop him in at the deep end, as it were. In the gentle surroundings of Foss Creek he can gradually — "

"Why does he need to study our ways? How do we know he won't use it against us?"

"Really, Mrs. Masterson, you must allow us to make our presentation. There will be time enough for questions at the end. Loo's ways are not altogether the same as ours. It is the desire of his people that they fit into our society, so they need to learn our ways. Obviously. Okay?"

"How are his ways different from ours?"

"The word different has negative implications, Mrs. Masterson. The Dengal culture runs parallel to ours, though removed. We seek to bring about the merging of twin cultures by making concessions on both sides."

"What concessions are you suggesting we make?"

"The same as we would make for any culture. We accommodate the Dengals into the melting pot of society. We respect their religious beliefs."

Mrs. Masterson was pleased to hear an alert murmuring from the audience, the kind of sound a single person might express by the word "aha!" People were beginning to think, and that was good. They needed facts, not platitudes. "Now we're getting somewhere!" she shouted. "What's so weird about the Dengals' religion, specifically?"

The creature Loo, who had been shifting about impatiently and scratching a great deal, said, "Let me explain, Anna."

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"Please do, Loo."

A huge grin almost decapitated Loo as he reared up to address his audience. Mrs. Masterson began to regret having chosen the front row. Loo at close quarters and dressed in an outsize business suit looked much bigger and more bizarre than when seen naked through binoculars. "Let me explain, you wonderful people," he began. His voice seemed to emanate from a dank pit, which was not surprising since Dengal vocal chords are situated in the esophagus rather than the windpipe, speech being a kind of controlled belch. This, in turn, is because Dengals are born with external gills; lungs do not develop until the adult phase.

Loo continued, maintaining his jovial smile, "I have studied various human religions without finding many similarities to ours. You see, we believe in the life force, or *dang*. We need no gods, with the *dang* to sustain us. The *dang* lies within us all, a precious gift and a limited one. There is no *dang* on a barren planet like Venus. And now, terribly, there is no *dang* on my home world Deng. We must not waste the *dang*." He sighed and bubbled, and abruptly assumed a pathetic expression.

All this seemed harmless enough. If the Dengals wanted to believe in this *dang* let them go ahead, people were thinking. Loo's pathetic look moved the audience to sympathy. "How can we help preserve the *dang*?" someone called anxiously.

"We do not believe in killing. Killing destroys the *dang*."

This was reassuring too, and the audience visibly relaxed. Frustrated by the pendulum's swing, Mrs. Masterson shouted, "But we understand the Dengals are carnivores!"

"That is so," agreed Loo.

"How can you be carnivores without killing?"

Loo's low forehead wrinkled in puzzlement; another learned behavior. "It's quite within the understanding of wonderful people like you. We consume our food before it has lost the *dang*."

Now the audience sat up. "You eat live animals?" There were isolated shouts of dismay. "How can you do that, for God's sake?"

"We just pop them down," explained Loo. "We absorb their *dang* as they disintegrate in our first stomach under the effects of powerful acids. We digest what we need for nourishment, then we disgorge the pelts and bones. Rabbits, voles, that kind of thing. I've found young rabbits particularly acceptable

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since my arrival. It's good for agriculture too, keeping down the pests. Oh, I think we Dengals are going to fit in very well."

"It's outrageous!" roared Mrs. Masterson, amid mutterings of concern from elsewhere. "I knew right away you'd eaten my Tabitha!"

But Loo had been briefed for that. "We do not eat felines. Felines have an unacceptable gamey flavor."

"How do you know, you monster?"

"It is written."

"And what about drink? I suppose you suck blood, eh?"

"Actually," said Loo placidly, "I have conceived a liking for tea. The question of *dang* does not arise, with tea."

"Ladies and gentleman, please!" Anna Tyler was on her feet, waving her hands. "Is this the way to welcome our guest? Earth is renowned for its tolerance in matters of religion! Are you going to let a little thing like this upset you? Shame on you all! Put yourself in Loo's position. Don't you think there are aspects of human culture that alarm *him*? The heedless slaughter, the butchering!"

"The roasting," murmured Loo. "It's the searing of flesh that appalls me. And the grinding of hamburger. But I will come to terms with it, for the sake of my people."

"You hear that?" cried Anna. "There's tolerance for you!"

By now the audience was calming down and a few people were looking ashamed of their outburst. "So many things to learn," said Loo, as a hush fell. "So many lives depending on it. I hope I am worthy of the trust my people have placed in me, and the trust of one in particular, who is very dear to me." At this, the more susceptible members of the audience began to sniffle into tissues. "Her name is Soo," said Loo.

"Pathetic remnants of a great civilization," said Anna Tyler. "Who are we to judge them?"

"What exactly happened to their world?" asked Mrs. Masterson nastily, but there was a chorus of shushes and she fell silent, mouth set in a grim line.

An hour later the last question was answered and Anna called the meeting closed. "You all know where I live," she said. "You are welcome at any time. And I'm sure you're welcome at Loo's cottage too. We'll be staying in Foss Creek until May, when I shall make my report to Earth Immigration on Loo's integration into your community."

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Loo said, "The success of my integration means a great deal to me, and to my people. Anna's report will recommend whether my people will be released from quarantine to become Earth citizens, or...." His voice trailed away. His expression became sad.

"How did it go?" he asked Anna a few minutes later as they climbed into her buggy.

"A good enough start." She regarded him thoughtfully. "Let's go to my place. We can discuss it over supper."

"Tea and hamsters?" asked Loo hopefully.

"Tea and hamsters it shall be, Loo."

MOST PEOPLE might think that a creature like Loo would be better off maintaining a low profile during his probationary period, but they would be wrong. At least, so thought Anna Tyler the sociologist.

"There must be no mystery, Loo," she told him a few days after the meeting in the village hall, as they sat comfortably in his living room. "Nothing to encourage speculation. You must be seen walking openly about the village, joining in community activities as much as possible. I understand they have an active gardening club here. It's not enough to be merely acceptable to people. The tragedy of the environmentally challenged person is that he or she must rise above the common ruck of humanity in order to attain the norm."

"That doesn't make sense," said Loo.

"I've never quite understood it either, but rest assured it's current theory. To be accepted as a person you must be more than a person. You must become popular, possibly even a leader. The Council elections take place in March. Perhaps we should put your name forward."

"I think that's going a bit far."

"I'm merely suggesting alternative scenarios." The image of excavator-mouthed and *dang*-loving Loo kissing babies had rung alarm bells. "But perhaps you're right." She sighed. "It would have been nice, though, to provide some opposition to that awful Masterson woman. She gets voted into office because people are frightened of her. You'd think her husband's criminal record would count against her, but somehow she's able to use that as a weapon, too." She pondered the situation. "You know, it *is* rather like an

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election. We're involved in a popularity contest. I'm campaigning for you, and it's the opinion of the community that'll count in the end." She favored him with a piercing look. "Are you sure we told them everything at the meeting? There are no funny little Dengal quirks we don't know about?"

"You know everything," said Loo gravely, popping down a hamster.

"Then we have nothing to worry about." She walked over to the window. A cottage could be seen through the leafless trees. "Let Mrs. Masterson do her worst," she declaimed in ringing tones. "We're squeaky clean!"

Mrs. Masterson, meanwhile, had also been considering alternative scenarios. "What we need, Megan," she told her elderly neighbor, "is a workable scheme. So far my only workable scheme is to take my twelve-bore over there and let that reptile have both barrels right up his cloaca!"

Megan Jenkins blanched. "But that would be murder, Rachel!"

"I'm not sure they've altered the statute book to encompass Dengals yet. Be that as it may, there is a drawback — I have no wish to create a martyr. There are strong forces in the village supporting the alien, and I think you know which forces I mean!"

"B-bleeding heart liberals?" quavered Megan, all too familiar with her neighbor's views.

"Precisely. So what we need is covert action. We cannot kill this alien, therefore we must discredit him."

"But.... He seems, somehow, a *good* kind of person."

"So the further he will fall. Now, let us think. As my father used to say, wherein lie the enemy's weaknesses? By God, I wish my father were around today. He'd give short shrift to this wretched alien!"

"But I understood the aliens gave short shrift to *him*, Rachel."

"Different aliens." She eyed her friend coldly. "Do I detect a defeatist attitude in you? It wouldn't be the first time, believe me." Her gaze traveled involuntarily to the silver photo frame turned face to the wall. "Wally is a tricky little fellow in many ways. He'd have found a way to play on that reptile's weaknesses just as he used to play on mine."

"You have weaknesses, Rachel?" asked Megan innocently.

"Precious few, I assure you. But this alien is a different kettle of fish. I watched people's faces at the meeting, and they're not too happy about his eating habits. Religious practices my eye! The ruthless devil likes to feel things wriggling as they go down!"

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"Ugh."

"My point exactly. I was talking to that clod Steffen this morning, God knows why, and he's tickled pink with the way the reptile's keeping the vermin under control. Apparently he roams the fields at night, gulping down rabbits by the score and sleeping it off by day." Mrs. Masterson paused as an intriguing train of thought occurred. "He's a big creature. What happens when the vermin are all gone? What does he eat then?"

"Anna Tyler feeds him hamsters."

"Just as a treat, as you or I might eat chocolates. Hamsters could never become a permanent diet for an animal that size. He needs bigger game." She smiled wolfishly. "It's a disturbing thought, don't you think?"

"If you say so, Rachel."

"Make sure you lock your doors and windows at night, my dear. Foss Creek isn't what it was. If people aren't aware of this already, they should be alerted!"

Ten minutes later she was regarding the haggard features of Wally on the visiphone. God, what a foul hole that penitentiary was! The phones were in the open area, and behind Wally she could see men sitting around listlessly, blank-faced. What a difference from Sol Station 2! There were no prisons on Sol Station 2. There was no room for such luxuries. Criminal tendencies were surgically corrected and the crooks resumed their place in society within days, cured and happy people. In fact you could always tell an ex-crook by his jolly nature. But there were no happy faces in this Earthside penitentiary. She could almost feel sorry for Wally, against her better judgment.

Wally leaned forward. "Here's what you do," he whispered.

The disappearance, one week later, of one of Carl Steffen's prize sheep caused a sensation in Foss Creek.

"Obviously there are rustlers about," said Anna Tyler. A handful of villagers had gathered under the awning of the general store, discussing the news. "City folk jealous of the rural life-style. Or possibly youthful city pranksters with nothing better to do."

"I beg to differ," said Mrs. Masterson. "City folk are contented with their lot, and young punks are well catered for. Ask yourselves: have we seen any strangers around recently? In early March, in this weather? City people know when they're well off — you won't catch them outside their domes. My belief

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is, we must look closer to home for the miscreant."

"Prime stock," shouted Steffen. "By Jesus, if I catch the devil who did this I'll flog him to within an inch of his life!"

"Or her," said Anna Tyler.

Megan Jenkins turned pale. "Why do you say her? Rustling is a man's crime, surely?"

"I was simply removing the sexist connotation from Carl's remark. Force of habit, I suppose. I had no intention of pointing any finger."

"It certainly sounded like an accusation." Megan's lips were trembling. "Why don't you come right out with it? If you suspect me, say so! I can't stand all this uncertainty!"

"For pity's sake shut up, Megan," snarled Mrs. Masterson. "Everybody's looking at you." She faced the curious onlookers. "When I said we must look closer to home, I meant we must look for someone in this village who has something to gain by such a crime. Some being," she clarified her meaning, "whether environmentally unchallenged or not!"

"Men *do* rustle," whimpered Megan Jenkins. "Women shoplift. It's a disease, the psychiatrist told me. I've never had the *slightest desire* to steal sheep. Never!" She fixed a watery stare on Mrs. Masterson.

But the group's attention had focussed on Loo, who'd been standing outside the awning, happy to get drenched by the slanting rain.

"If you're implying Loo ate Carl's sheep you're more stupid than you look, Mrs. Masterson," snapped Anna. "A whole sheep at one sitting? Get real, please."

But Steffen was eyeing the alien closely. "It may not have been at one sitting. It could have been taken home and consumed at leisure. I don't count the sheep every day; it depresses me. I drive them out in the morning, I round them up at night. Sometimes I find a sheep drowned on the beach, or hanged in the fork of a tree, or disemboweled by barbed wire; that's sheep for you. But I can account for them all, and I can assure you one of my sheep has been stolen!"

Loo sensed the tide turning against him. "I venerate the *dang*," he said. "I cannot kill. Now look at my mouth, you wonderful people." He smiled broadly. "Is there any way I could swallow a sheep whole?"

Mrs. Masterson rummaged among her shopping, took a danish pastry from bag and handed it to Tommy Steffen, Carl Steffen's ten-year-old son. He

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took it cautiously, shot the old lady a look of deep suspicion, but slowly began to eat.

Meanwhile people were scrutinizing Loo's smile and nodding reluctantly. Huge though his mouth was by human standards, it could not have accommodated a sheep. Anna said, "I think that clears Loo. Now, what were you saying, Megan?"

As Megan went into a convincing imitation of a frightened rabbit, Mrs. Masterson snapped, "Nobody said anything about swallowing a sheep whole. You don't have to swallow it whole to preserve the *dang*. There are many parts of a sheep inessential to life in the short term."

"I don't quite follow you," said Anna.

Mrs. Masterson swung round and pointed a dramatic finger. "I have just organized a practical demonstration. I draw your attention to young Tommy and his danish pastry. You will note the center of the pastry contains a quantity of strawberry jelly — the essential part, let us say. And what is Tommy doing? He is eating around the perimeter of the pastry, leaving the jelly until last." She smiled triumphantly. "You may draw your own conclusions."

As a practical demonstration, it failed to convince. When the laughter had subsided, Anna, wiping her eyes, said, "So you think Loo eats around the edge of a sheep and pops the heart down last? Perhaps we can persuade Carl to lend us a sheep for a full-scale re-enactment of the crime."

But Mrs. Masterson was already climbing into her buggy. "Doesn't it occur to you people — this story of preserving the *dang* could be intended to lull us into a false sense of security? That this creature has his own reasons for wanting us to believe anything above rabbit-size is safe from his mammoth appetite? Come, Megan, unless you want to walk home. We're wasting our time with these dolts. We have more important things to do."

The more important things related to the disposal of the sheep presently housed in a small garage beside Megan's cottage. "I can't think how you ever got me into this, Rachel," Megan said despairingly as they stood outside, listening to the bleating.

"You have no buggy, therefore your garage was empty."

"No, I mean all of this!" Megan waved her arms, encompassing the garage, the cottage, the tidal inlet and, glimpsed through the trees, the hillside on which the remnants of Steffen's flock grazed. "The rustling! Creeping

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around at night, sneaking into that barn and then," she shuddered, "the screaming. That awful screaming across the dark fields."

"That was just a rabbit being eaten by Loo. I told you so at the time."

"Maybe it was, but I haven't had a wink of sleep since. I'll have to go for treatment again. And now this." Her gestures narrowed down, embracing only the bleating garage. "What on earth are we going to do with it?"

"We simply hold it until Loo is thoroughly discredited, then smuggle it back into the flock."

"But nobody believed Loo ate it!" wailed Megan. "The whole thing's been a ghastly fiasco!"

"That is the current viewpoint, admittedly. But if there's one thing my father taught me, it's how to turn defeat into victory."

"But in the end he *was* defeated!"

"Well, naturally he died before he could teach me the lessons of that particular defeat, you fool, and I like to think I'm a better woman for it. The point is, we have the sheep and Loo lives two doors away. Surely we can turn that to advantage?"

"How?"

"Suppose someone were to find....*evidence* of sheep right there in his house."

"But there is no evidence of sheep in his house. The only evidence of sheep is in my garage and I want it out of there!"

"Just suppose," Mrs. Masterson's voice dropped to an impressive whisper, "we were to *plant* such evidence."

"But that would be dishonest!"

"I prefer to use the word felicitous. And it is no more felicitous than our little foray last night. Events have been set in motion. There's no turning back now."

"Yes, there is! We can sneak it back into the flock right now, this minute, while everyone's in the village!"

Mrs. Masterson snorted. "And where does that get us? That reptile gets a clean bill of health, and next thing you know a whole pack of aliens descend on the village with the Government's blessing." She seized her friend by the wrist. "Listen to me, you fool. Have you any idea how many young those creatures can produce at one sitting?"

"N-no."

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"Well, think of turtles on a beach. And while you're thinking I'll bring my twelve-bore; I've heard enough of this bleating. How much room do you have in your deep-freeze?"

"Rachel!"

But her friend had gone.

THE TIME was ripe. The Council had responded to Loo's invitation to visit him the following morning. And earlier that evening — thought Mrs. Masterson cynically — the alien and the treacherous Tyler woman had most likely been through his cottage planting eloquently commonplace items all over the place. Language videos. Tapes of the works of the most respected human writers. Beethoven. A couple of Picasso reproductions on the walls. And all traces of anything strange would have been removed, particularly if it had been previously disgorged.

So a surprise must be prepared for her gullible colleagues on the Council. And what better time to prepare it than at dead of night, while the reptile was stalking the countryside eating God's little creatures?

Mrs. Masterson shuffled through the darkness, a bulging plastic garbage bag over the shoulder. She shuffled alone. Her fellow-conspirator had quit, her stomach having rebelled during the process of gutting and skinning the sheep.

"This is no job for yellow-bellies," Mrs. Masterson had snapped. "For God's sake go and lie down, woman. But don't get any funny ideas about notifying the police. Remember, it's your deep-freeze the carcass will be in. I shall deny all knowledge, of course."

The alien's back door was not locked. Clearly he lacked the capacity for forethought — further proof of his unsuitability for human society. Mrs. Masterson pushed the door open. The layout of this cottage was similar to her own. Where was the best place to plant the sheepskin? Nowhere too obvious, otherwise the reptile would find it before his visitors arrived. Neither could it be too obscure, otherwise it would be difficult to fake the discovery during the Council's visit.

It would have to be somewhere in the living room; maybe under the chesterfield. Yes, that would be fine. She could visualize the scene. "That's funny," she'd say during a lull in the conversation. "There's something by your foot, Charles." And Charles, or maybe Elsie or Wayne, would reach

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down and pull it out. "What the hell is this?" they would say. And their accusing stares would swing toward the alien. "It looks like the disgorged skin of a sheep!" they would cry.

Smiling to herself at the simplicity of it all, Mrs. Masterson pushed open the living room door and immediately found she was not alone in the house.

The alien sat with his back to her, watching a large visiphone screen. The only illumination came from the screen itself, but it was enough to show the relaxed form of Tabitha asleep in the alien's lap. Mrs. Masterson's flash of fury at the faithlessness of her feline subsided as her attention was caught by the scene on the visiphone.

There was another alien onscreen, very similar in appearance to Loo, although its scales had a pinkish hue and it was wearing a dress. If the effect of a business suit on Loo had been incongruous, the sight of this apparently female alien in a dress was utterly ridiculous. And clearly the alien knew it too. She stood in a dejected attitude, arms drooping at an odd angle from her shoulders. And now Mrs. Masterson noticed other aliens in the picture too, all dressed in human clothes, sitting around in attitudes of hopelessness, some even lying on the bare concrete floor. The scene stirred a chord in her memory. It also stirred an unaccustomed emotion she barely recognized.

The female alien was talking human speech. "It'll work out, Loo. It's got to work out. We're doing our best here, but it's difficult. They're watching us all the time, bringing groups through to stare at us, taping everything we do and say, then analyzing it and interviewing us about it. We can't be ourselves for a moment, in case we do or say something that blows our case."

"I know what you mean, Soo," said Loo. "The Council are visiting me tomorrow, but really it's more of an inspection and I'm pretty sure they'll find something wrong. At least Mrs. Masterson will. Anna and I have spent most of the day humanizing the place, as if it isn't human enough already. Oh, Soo, how I miss the caves at the lake!"

"At least Anna is on our side."

Loo uttered a bubbling sigh. "Only because she sees us as aliens. To her, we're just a crusade. Mrs. Masterson is against us for the same reason. In both cases the reason is wrong, isn't it?"

"It would be wrong on Deng. But then, we were the only intelligent species on Deng. How would we have reacted if a group of humans had shown up? Pretty much the same as the humans are reacting now, I think. Try to

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understand them, Loo. Make allowances."

"You haven't been living among them. They're very different from us, Soo. I'm thinking we'd all be better off recognizing it."

"They'd lock us away here forever!"

"Well, we're never going to fit in the way I'm trying to now. We can't go on pretending to be human. It just won't work."

There was a long silence while the two aliens regarded each other. Eventually Soo said quietly, "Do whatever you must. And trust in the *dang*."

"I will. Love you, Soo."

"Love you."

The screen went blank. The room was dark. Mrs. Masterson stood motionless for a long time. A tiny crack of light issued from the drapes; probably moonlight. The clouds must have cleared at last. She could make out Loo's blunt silhouette as he sat there as unmoving as she.

"Damn this!" she said suddenly, and tapped the door. "Loo! Are you at home?"

The room sprang into light. Loo's head swiveled toward her, eyes wide. "Mrs. Masterson!"

"I just dropped by to see if.... Megan Jenkins said she'd caught sight of.... Oh, I see you have her here. Tabitha, thank heavens!"

Loo's hand caressed the cat. A rattling purr resulted. "She came to my door this evening. She was tired and rather muddy. I fed her and cleaned her up. She's been good company."

Mrs. Masterson said hesitantly, "It can get lonely, being by oneself."

"It can. Uh, can I offer you a glass of anything?" Loo began to stand, blinked rapidly a few times, snatched a rug from the floor beside his chair and wrapped it around his torso. "I'm sorry. I forgot for a moment. I find it more comfortable when I'm alone.... You understand? If you'll excuse me I'll put some clothes on."

Tabitha, startled by the rapid movement, fled past Mrs. Masterson into the night. She threw the plastic bag after her and entered the living room. "Clothes?" she said. "I'd be insulted if you got dressed on my account. Please stay just as you are."

He stared at her. "If you like."

She sat down. "I'll take a dry sherry, if you have such a thing. Now, it seems to me it's high time we got to know each other better — we have more

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in common than I'd realized. Tell me all about this Soo of yours."

The month of May. Warmer weather was returning to Foss Creek. The sun struggled through the canopy of new leaves and cast a glow over a wooden sundeck overlooking the inlet. Two women sat there; one youngish, bespectacled and rather pale, dressed in flowing hand-printed cottons; the other elderly and wearing severely cut tweeds. Both were watching the cottage next door.

"What do you think they're *doing*, Rachel?" asked Anna Tyler.

Mrs. Masterson handed her a cup of tea and uttered a bark of laughter. "It's not what they're doing that interests me. It's how they do it."

"It's thanks to you that they have a chance to do it at all, whatever it is."

"Nonsense, girl. I simply made my views clear and the Council followed like sheep." She colored slightly on the last word. "They always do. Really, we don't need a Council at all, with me in charge. A benevolent dictatorship would get things done around here!"

"Well, thanks anyway. It was your recommendation that swung it with Earth Immigration. They saw your point. The Dengals are being allowed to live their own lives, however and wherever they want. Really, once we accept them as being different from us, the only real problem is this wretched *dang* business. It does tend to revolt people."

"They'll get used to it."

Anna hesitated. "I owe Loo an apology. I made matters more difficult for him than they need have been."

"Don't apologize!" cried the old lady. "It's the hallmark of the weakling. I've never apologized in my life, I'm happy to say!"

"Look!" said Anna. "There they are!"

The back door of the cottage opened. Loo and Soo emerged, unclothed and scaly, and descended the steps to the rocky beach.

"Are they going for a swim?" Mrs. Masterson speculated. "Funny kind of thing to be doing, in the circumstances."

The aliens threw themselves into the water, rolled over a few times, then disappeared. The women watched as first one, then the other surfaced, gulped air and submerged again. "They seem to be enjoying it," said Anna.

"I never saw Loo swim before."

"I didn't encourage it. It wouldn't have been altogether acceptable, a

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naked alien wallowing about the inlet in the middle of winter. It would certainly have prejudiced their chances with your Council." Anna watched them worriedly. "I still think we should suggest — tactfully, of course — that humans might find the sight...bizarre...."

"And I think Dengals should do what the hell they like. If people can't take it, well, they shouldn't look. I'll wager that's the cause of Loo's skin problems. Too many clothes and not enough good honest salt water."

"Dengals are not marine creatures," said Anna. "But I suppose they need the occasional dip. They lived in caves around a chain of lakes. Nevertheless their culture is at least as highly developed as our own," she added defiantly.

"I dare say, but look at them now. That looks pretty basic to me."

The Dengals lay in the shallows, embracing closely. Little ripples spread across the flat water as their bodies vibrated. There was something oddly familiar about the sight.

Anna said slowly, "Coupling in the water? And the young have external gills. Do you know, Rachel, I don't believe they're reptiles after all. They're amphibians!"

A curious explosive sound caused the birds to rise from the trees. It was Mrs. Masterson laughing. "Amphibians! By God, you're right! So much for your tactful suggestion. It's going to be pretty difficult to keep amphibians away from the water!"

The happy couple emerged from the inlet and began to climb the steps, hand in hand. Loo glanced up and saw the humans watching. "Rachel!" he called. "There's all kinds of swimming things in the water here. Is it all right for us to eat them?"

A few centuries previously, one stout Cortez and his companions were reputed to have looked at each other with a wild surmise, on first sighting the Pacific Ocean. The surmise of stout Cortez and his fellow Spaniards, however, paled into lethargy when compared to the surmise with which Anna Tyler and Rachel Masterson gazed at each other that May afternoon.

"Good grief!" Anna whispered, "It never occurred to me they might eat live fish!"

"The *dang* is still the *dang*, however it may be packaged. Simplicity itself, my dear Anna. A quick dip, a bellyful of mackerel. No more prowling the fields at night, no more offense to the weak stomachs among us. After all, who in hell really cares what the Dengals are doing when they're swimming

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about under the water?"

"What fools we've been!"

"Speak for yourself, woman." Mrs. Masterson leaned over the sundeck rail. "Eat what you like, by all means!" she shouted. "But first, why don't you two kids come up here for a bite with us?"

"Tea and hamsters?" called Loo eagerly.

"I've got some in specially for you," said Mrs. Masterson.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

PRISONERS OF PERCEPTION

Slow Funeral, Rebecca Ore, Tor, 1994, 320 pp., $21.95 hc.

BACK IN the fifties and sixties, when nobody in science fiction or fantasy made best sellerdom or big bucks, in many important ways everyone in the field was treated pretty much the same. The income difference between the top-paid writers and the lowest may have been significant, but it wasn't a different order of existence. And the difference between the kind of fiction Poul Anderson wrote and the kind Fritz Leiber wrote may also have been significant, but no one questioned whether they both belonged in the field.

Things have changed a lot since then. Now the market's puffed up like a blowfish, so that those at the top get advances on single novels that represent ten times the career earnings of those at the bottom. There are many kinds of writers: the highbrows, the packagers, the high fantasists, the low fantasists, the horror writers, the hard sf writers, the soft sf writers, the feminists, the series writers, the producers of movie and TV tie-ins, the sharecroppers. People debate whether much of what fills the science fiction racks of your local bookstore even qualifies as science fiction, and by what definition. Meanwhile the field is being driven by publishing perceptions, marketing decisions, conglomerate bottom lines. In 1960, no one wrote sf to become rich; I can't presume to say why individual writers write sf today, but some *are* getting rich.

You may have noticed before now that in these columns I've spent my time reviewing only certain corners of the field. (For instance, as a rule I don't read fantasy series or war

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game books—not because I'm avoiding them deliberately, but because I find most of them hard to like.) Some of the writers I've reviewed here are big names, some are quite popular, some even earn a lot of money. But much of what seems to me the most challenging sf published today earns its writers neither fame nor fortune. You might think that critical attention would make up for lack of commercial success, but unfortunately there are lots of intellectually ambitious writers who don't have either critical *or* commercial clout, who though they are trying to do something different within the constrictions of today's bottom-line dominated market, are so packaged and sold that their work doesn't attract the sophisticated readers who might appreciate it, nor does it satisfy the least-common-denominator reader. Not all of these books are successful, or good reads. But it's especially galling for those who write solidly within the traditions of sf and fantasy, while trying to push the edges a bit, to get little money and precious little respect for their efforts.

I don't know what her commercial track record is, but Rebecca Ore is one of those writers I think of as laboring to produce work that's commercially acceptable while still doing things that matter to her. Her first three novels, *Becoming Alien*, *Being Alien*, and *Human to Human*, gained her some attention, but at the same time placed her in a niche that is not, I think, an accurate reflection of her intentions. The books were a series, paperback originals, packaged with space opera covers, rife with aliens. To some extent this was an accurate representation, but it obscured how Ore was trying to do other things besides tell an adventure story about humans among the galaxy's exotic aliens. Her later *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* was not much like that trilogy and must have confused those readers who bought it expecting more of the same. *Slow Funeral*, a contemporary fantasy set in a backwoods county of Virginia, takes Ore in a still different direction.

The story concerns Maude Fuller, who as a young woman ran away from the hereditary aristocracy of Bracken County seeking "the dream universe of level playing fields and meritocracy and rules that worked the same for everyone." Twenty years later she's ended up in Berkeley, living in a house of counter culture people who consider themselves "witches," though they are nothing like the real witches Maude grew up with. That dream universe of equality and reason may not exist,

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though Berkeley is closer to it than Bracken County.

The novel begins when Maude hears the supernatural voice of her dying grandmother Partridge calling her back to Bracken County. She hesitates, then goes, there to struggle with her family and its heritage of magic. Bracken County is not a part of the continent geologically, and not part of the 20th century. It is fighting a so-far successful holding action against science and reason. Logic counteracts magic, magic seeks to encompass and control logic, as with the Virginia state senator who has a scientific research institute in the back of his pickup truck — shrunken and controlled, with researchers as his puppets. The locals react to overflights by National Guardsmen looking for fields of marihuana:

> *Most older Bracken County people hated having the helicopters overhead because that much unadapted machinery in the air spread logic all over the place and killed magic.... But children looked around when the machines flew. Freed of a compulsion to stay in the county and fetch and carry for someone powerful, some local kids from powerless classes joined the military under the protection of its vast machines...and left, got educated, and never came back.*

Maude's arrogant boyfriend Doug, fascinated by magic, follows her from Berkeley. Doug is an engineer who is attracted by Maude's great aunt Betty and Betty's husband Luke, the most powerful witches in the family. He is befriended by Maude's cousin Terry and her husband John, who represent a younger generation that uses magic unconsciously. John, a modern Southern weapon-toting rugged individualist, has, apparently unawares, eaten the soul of a black boy who was fascinated by John's guns. He is a contemporary redneck as warlock.

Back in Bracken County Maude finds herself caught in the middle. Magic allows her relatives to control others, with users in turn controlled by "entities," non-human forces from which magic originates. Though magic is part of her nature, Maude doesn't want to be either a controller or controlled. She doesn't want to use the power, but wants to protect those like Doug who are at risk.

All of Ore's earlier books have in different ways expressed the vision of someone living in or tied to the rural South; in *Slow Funeral*'s portrait of Bracken County she gives us

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the South and its peculiar culture more directly than she ever has before. In the way that Bracken County is physically isolated from the rest of the American continent (geologically it is built on rock separate from the structures that raised the Appalachians and the surrounding land), the South as a whole has been culturally isolated from the rest of American society. Ore shows us this cultural separation in real places, habits and people, from auto repair sheds to cockfights to quiltmaking to the inhabitants' casual and unapologetic racism and their steady opposition to change. The lives of Bracken County's people are penned in by family history. One of the first questions a person gets in the South is "Who are your people?" —as if to know a person's family is to know all he is capable of. In *Slow Funeral*, Maude struggles against a place that sees family as destiny.

Maude, unable to meet the expectations of her "people," has become a permanent outsider. Outside Bracken County she has never found a home, has drifted, taken many lovers, held various jobs. Though she is highly intelligent and penetratingly analytical, she is also deeply insecure, perhaps even clinically paranoid. Back in Berkeley Maude claimed to be mad in order to get welfare money, but maybe she *is* mad, and the magic calls she hears in her mind are only the delusions of a schizophrenic. For its first half the novel hovers between psychological and supernatural explanations for "magic." Ore uses this ambiguity to make social comments: *Slow Funeral* says as much about traditional forms of social control as it does about witchcraft. Ore shows how many exploited people hold tight to the very habits and institutions by which they are being used. She understands "the deep loyalties given by the powerless to those who never planned to honor their workers' faith." Beneath the placid and seemingly easygoing surface of this Southern way of life there is no escape from the ethic of "use or be used"; as Maude's Aunt Betty tells her, people in Bracken County "can choose whether to be on top of magic or under it, not magic or no magic."

At points Maude wonders whether all the mind control that goes on in Bracken County is merely psychological intimidation by upper class whites over the tenant farmers and poor blacks. Is magic just another word for power of place in the Southern social structure, or intimidation by personality? *Slow Funeral* is about this as well, how even a woman like Maude who grew up in this world, sees the way it works, and

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does not want to participate in it, is still run over by it.

In the course of this supernatural arm wrestling, one gets the sense of the alienation of a woman born and raised in the South, a close observer of its mores who has tried to escape it but has been drawn back. Someone who is both a part of and a critic of this place and culture. Ore offers many skewed observations about human behavior, some of them very penetrating, others funny, others just odd. At times Rebecca Ore is hard to read in the way that Gwyneth Jones is hard — I can't always follow her thought; her characters make leaps of allusion or reaction that seem unnatural to me, so that I have to stop and figure out how they draw the conclusions they do. It's as if Ore, and her characters, think sideways from the rest of us (or at least me). But as I've commented in the past about Jones's *White Queen*, this can be a virtue as well as a drawback.

The first half of the novel develops too slowly for my tastes, but eventually it gathers force to a harrowing climax. Maude must choose between using magic or forsaking it, leaving herself and others vulnerable to those who see exploitation as natural, justified by hundreds of years of history and embodied in the personalities of the users and the used.

Though the Southern social structure provides a place, security, and to some, power, in the end Maude votes for the "level playing field world" — the 20th century, or perhaps the 21st — even if for most it's still only a hope.

Do we have that level playing field in SF publishing and marketing? It would be nice to see this different sort of fantasy find a wide audience. How awful if we were prisoners of a culture as rigid as that of Bracken County — prisoners of other people's perceptions, expectations, our own histories. How awful if science fiction were a world of the favored vs. the neglected. Of names that people conjure with, of eaters of souls — even unconscious ones.

Comments or questions: write Kessel on the Internet: tenshi@unity.ncsu.edu

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Towing Jehovah, by James Morrow, Harcourt Brace, 1994, 371pp, $23.95, Hardcover.

ONE OF the most difficult aspects of writing a good satire is walking that fine line between polemic and story. Concentrating only on the former results in a diatribe, the kind of rant that any nitwit with a word processor can spew out. Without story, only the fanatics will read you, and even they'd rather be talking than listening. *Gulliver's Travels* isn't still being read today because of Swift's politics, but because it works on the level of a first class narrative. Yet the resonance of the novel gains its strength from Swift's sharp and bitter satires of political life and the values in his time, and his idea that mankind has corrupted what Swift perceives as our highest attribute, our reason.

James Morrow is as gifted a satirist, albeit a more contemporary one. His reflections on religion in *Only Begotten Daughter* (1990) and this new novel exemplify his gift for cutting through to the heart of our systems of belief while still crafting remarkable stories of character and event. Michael Bishop has said of him, "In Iran, Morrow wouldn't last two sentences," but like Rushdie in his infamous questioning of his Muslim faith, Morrow doesn't appear to attack Christianity with a blind eye or bitterness, but rather because he cares about people and what they believe in. And why they believe in it.

Towing Jehovah, as the title implies, tells of the appearance of a gigantic corpse — two miles long! — discovered in the Atlantic Ocean and the efforts of two men chosen by dying angels to tow it to a tomb in the Arctic. For this is the body of God, and who more so than the Creator should be allowed a decent burial to preserve Him from sharks and decomposition?

God's death raises fascinating questions, of course. Atheists are suddenly confronted with the fact that not only were they wrong —

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God did exist — but now He's dead. True believers are in no less of a quandary, for, since most religions depend on one's faith, what happens when you're presented with the fact of God's existence and subsequent death?

Morrow explores these issues, naturally enough, and takes pot shots at any number of other venerable institutions and hobbyhorses — from the Catholic Church and chauvinism to World War II buffs and rationalism — but he never strays from concentrating on the story and his characters: such as Captain Anthony Van Horne who, charged with towing the immense body, sees it as a way he can redeem himself for the immense oil spill he was involved in a few years previous — a disaster that still haunts his dreams; Thomas Ockham, the Jesuit priest, who comes to discover that the task put to him by the angels will inevitably lead him into a confrontation with his Church; Cassie Fowler, a militant rationalist who falls in love with Van Horne but is still determined to sabotage his mission.

Towing Jehovah isn't a long book, and its pace is such that it reads quickly, but it's still dense with wonderful detail, forays into absurdity and great import, and will leave discerning readers with many questions to consider and ask, both of themselves and the society in which they find themselves. In short, it does all the things good sf is supposed to do, and does them exceedingly well.

The Grass Dancer, by Susan Power, Putnam, 1994, 300pp, $22.95, Hardcover.

I find it interesting that much of the best fantasy being published today appears under mainstream imprints. Rather than simply rehashing elements with which we're all too familiar, these authors are taking chances and finding magic in places where genre authors seldom think to look. And best of all, they don't overexplain ad nauseam — either their use of the preternatural or, as a friend rightly pointed out to me recently, the motivations of their characters.

What's also interesting is that many of these authors are Native Americans. Two of the best books of 1993 were *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King, and Alexie Sherman's short story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfighting in Heaven*, which also deserves mention as one of the more entertaining book titles of the year. These authors don't romanticize Native life, but present it with all its hardships and joys, and — probably most importantly — a sense of history and mythic resonance that is as entwined with

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the day-to-day life of their characters as one finds in the work of the South American Magical Realists.

By such consideration, Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* is a fine contender for 1994.

At the heart of her multigenerational novel set on a contemporary Dakota Sioux reservation is the story of Red Dress, a warrior woman who was brutally murdered in the mid-1800s, and the sacred clown Ghost Horse who married her spirit after her death. From that event, their ghosts go on through the years to affect the lives of their descendants, visiting them in dreams and spirit visions.

Except for "Snakes," the chapter from Red Dress' point of view near the end of the book, *The Grass Dancer* is told from the perspectives of the various descendants. Power bravely jumps about in time, from the 1980s back to the 1930s, switching point of view with each chapter, yet it's to her credit that the reader is never lost. In fact, her story could be told no other way, for its resonance grows its non-linear qualities.

For instance, fascinated though we are by her, we can loathe the manipulative old witch Anna Thunder through most of the book, then be struck numb with "Red Moccasins," the chapter from her viewpoint as a young girl, when we understand why she is so detestable. Had that revelation come any sooner, "Red Moccasins" wouldn't have been nearly so powerful. What's most impressive is that, even when we know the bare bones outline of events — such as Red Dress' fate — when the actual scene comes on stage in "Snakes," we are no less moved by it and the grief of her family.

In addition to her gifted skill with narrative and character, Power's use of language is beautiful, simply on it own merits. Passages ring with a clear, singing prose that's as pure and potent as the great tracts of grassland that once covered much of our continent, so much so that readers will find themselves going back to reread paragraphs for the sheer pleasure of her writing. That's a rare talent even for a mature writer, but an astonishing feat for a first novelist such as she.

The Unknown Soldier, by Mickey Zucker Reichert, DAW Books, 1994, 316pp, $4.99, Paperback.

Reading only books of great literary merit is somewhat akin to never having dessert. There's nothing wrong with dessert, or having the odd meal at a fast food restaurant — it's just not particularly good for you if that's all you ever eat.

Now, by prefacing a review

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Mickey Reichert's *The Unknown Soldier* with the above paragraph, I don't mean to imply that there's anything intrinsically bad about her writing or her story. On the contrary, it's a highly entertaining, fast-paced read. It's just not a deep think sort of book. But while it doesn't have resonances that last beyond its final page, it's certainly a diverting way to spend an evening and sometimes that's all a reader is looking for.

Reichert has chosen that classic suspense novel theme to open her novel: the amnesia victim whom everybody is trying to kill and nobody knows why. *The Unknown Soldier* begins with a badly wounded man being discovered and treated in a hospital. He has little memory and while he doesn't appear to be of foreign extraction, he has little understanding of many of the common day-to-day elements of every day life in America. What memories he can access are of a violent nature, leading him to believe that he might be a violent criminal.

The truth is far stranger than that, and of a science fictional nature, but I don't want to get into it any more than that for fear of spoiling any surprises. What I will say is that Reichert handles her action scenes with aplomb and keeps the pace moving throughout. *The Unknown Soldier* makes for a better evening's recreation than what's on the TV or most of what you haven't already seen on the shelves at your local video store.

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We have a number of holiday stories in this issue, and Leslie What's is the first. She calls this story her revenge for "getting lost in the land of Nano-Cyber-Tech-Punk-Nology." In addition to her stories in F&SF *(most recently in our May 1994 issue), she has been published in* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and* Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine.

Compatibility Clause

By Leslie What

REALITY ROD'S WAS A GYMnasium-sized concrete box, its dark walls gray like tire-packed snow. I stopped in, hoping to catch the Night Before Christmas Warehouse Clearance. A salesman sporting a brown goatee asked if he could help me.

"I'm interested in a discount reality," I said.

"Sorry," he said, "but our sale doesn't start until seven."

In times past I might have left without protest, but I sensed this was my last chance. I had already blown most of our joint Keogh plan on a series of surgeries, and wasn't about to give up now.

I took off my wool cloak and hung it over the chair-back beside the workstation display. "I can't come back," I said, flipping on my power-voice. I accessed the assertiveness program. "And I need a unit. Tonight."

He looked me over, perhaps awed by my newly enhanced physique: your basic leaner, meaner me with added turbo-thrust, in all the right places.

"Maybe I could make one exception," he said.

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I flipped off the power-voice. There was no point in ruining what remained of my reputation. "Thanks," I said, giving what I knew was a matronly grin. "Appreciate the help."

"According to stats, most women are afraid of technology. I'd recommend the MacOuterface Lifestyle System-38."

"Fine," I said. "So long as I don't need to read any manuals."

"Works intuitively. Women's strong point, I hear."

"Yes," I said, though what most people called intuition was just as often magic.

"Of course, its main selling feature is compatibility. You plug the link in here." He pointed to where metal ports had been implanted in my temples.

"I forgot to ask what those holes were for," I said.

His raised his upper lip, as if unsure whether to smile or sneer.

I slipped off my granny glasses and brought my fingertips to the port's cold rim. "Technology. Never understood it."

"Funny the doctors didn't tell you."

"Oh, they might have, but I wasn't paying attention. Too much else on my mind."

"Thought your husband would explain it, later?" He took a step backward, probably worried that he'd upset me.

"Something like it," I said.

"We sell a lot of these units to the wives," he said, nodding his head in sympathy. He sat to open a file. "Didn't catch your first name."

"Mrs.," I said. I gave him my credit card, then left for home.

There was work to be done before I could link up. I ironed *The Suit*; set the VCR to record Arsenio; left a message on the elves' com-line, reminding them to complete their orders by midnight; programmed the oven to convect for thirty minutes, then switch to microwave until the cheese melted. I opened a dark Cabernet to let it breathe, and set the table.

I unpacked the computer, plugged the trodes into my temples, and linked. The next thing I knew I was sitting in a small room in front of a shiny metal door marked *Enter Net*. My legs were unnaturally bent in the lotus position.

"Greetings," said the humanoid tech projected onto the door. "I'm your MacOuterface Lifestyle System-38." His white coat stopped mid-thigh and

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he stood with his left hip thrust forward. He held a plastic comb in one hand, his chin in the other, shears dangling from his pinkie. "What can we do with you, today?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. "It's just that my husband doesn't notice me anymore."

"Well, well, well," he said. "I think we can make you more presentable."

He scanned my face and wagged his index finger. "There's nothing to be done with these wrinkles, but we could do something with the gray," he said.

I noticed my reflection in the metal door. Suddenly, green fluorescent lightning bolts surged around my head.

"I was thinking more traditional," I said.

"I doubt traditional will cut it. How about this?" He gave me green horns, tomato worms gored on the ends. "And this...." He made my teeth jagged, gray as boiled chicken bones, then turned my face into inside-out cellulite, for laughs. "I think he'll notice you now. Anything else I can do you for?" he said.

I considered my options momentarily before blurting out, "I don't know how to get inside the Net."

"No problemo," he said. "MacOuterface reads all systems. Virtually intuitive. Only your hairdresser knows for sure."

"That's what they said at the store."

"Ready or not, here you come. Just say 'Glow' when you want to come out." He held the door open and I entered.

I hadn't expected such a vast space, and I stood for a moment, looking around. There were hundreds of men and boys sword-fighting on different levels of reality, lions and tigers crouched in corners, rocket ships zipping above me. There were three women dressed as princesses. I simply could not understand what my husband saw here, or had this reality changed once I entered it, become a tedious existence, like our marriage?

I saw my target then, the fat little man with the merry eyes and the white beard made of clouds. He appeared as Merlin for the D&D game he'd come to role-play with a friend who called himself NESSIE. They had played the game daily for the past six months; it had reached the point where my husband could no longer fulfill either his marital or contractual obligations.

"Honey," I said softly. When he didn't answer, I flipped on my assertiveness program. I screamed, a bloodcurdling roar that sent shocks

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across the field. Action stopped as my husband turned toward me.

"Who are you?" he asked. The sparkle in his eyes melted to fear. I loved him so this way.

"Dear," I said in a wicked, throaty grunt. "Did you forget? We talked about having a nice supper before you left for work."

His shoulders slumped. "That's right," he said. "Be there in a second." I caught the look he gave NESSIE, caught NESSIE mouth back, "Wives."

"Just let me save my game," he said, "and I'll come right out."

"Fine, but I mean business." To make my point, I plucked a bird from the Net and stuffed it into my mouth. I let the blood drool down my chin, and laughed, snorting out red feathers through my nose.

"Glow," I said, and I was out of the Net. I pulled out the trodes and walked into the dining room to wait.

He trudged in from the general direction of the workshop.

"Hi," he said. "What's for dinner?"

"Did you forget what day it was?"

"Sorry, dear. I just get so caught up in that game."

I pushed him down into his chair. At that moment I saw that I didn't give a hoot about the children, or what they got for Christmas. What I craved was ultimate power over my household. I poured us both dark wine and pushed his glass toward him, spilling a few drops on the tablecloth. I sniffed the rich bouquet, swirled the liquid around the rim, then watched the wine's red legs drip slowly down the the crystal.

"To us," I said, and drank without waiting for his second.

"How was your day?"

"Fine," he said. He took a tiny sip of wine and wrinkled his face. It pleased me that he didn't care for the strong nose of the Cabernet.

"You've managed to find your own reality, now," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

"Now Santa," I answered. "Magic worked for most of time, but it's become such a complicated world I felt like I needed technology to compete."

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Film Editor Harlan Ellison recently won the Bram Stoker Award and the Locus Award for his novella, "Mefisto in Onyx." He is Conceptual Consultant on Babylon 5 *and the sf commentator on* Sci-Fi Buzz. *His sixtieth book,* Mind Fields, *appeared in 1994.* Mind Fields *is a collaboration with Polish artist Jacek Yerka and contains wonderful stories like "Susan," featured with Yerka's artwork in our December 1993 issue.*

Harlan wrote "Keyboard" on May 14, 1994, in the window of the Booksmith in San Francisco. Harlan has written in bookstores from New Orleans to Paris, and to prove that he has not prepared anything, he asks local celebrities to provide him with a sealed envelope containing a story idea moments before he sits at the typewriter. This time, the celebrity was actor Robin Williams, a friend of Harlan's who knows that Harlan does not use a computer. Inside the envelope was this idea: "Computer Vampyre (or, the Byte that Bites)." From those seven words and the mind of Harlan Ellison came "Keyboard."

Keyboard

By Harlan Ellison

CHRIS HUDAK KNEW HE was in trouble when his computer bit him. Not hard, not the first time. Just a nip. The merest drawing of blood from his index finger.

Chris looked down as the drop of crimson spattered on the keyboard, examined the finger, sucked at the puncture for a moment, then quizzically stared at the rows of input pads. The H key had sprouted a fang. Not a large fang; something like a baby shark incisor. Just enough to draw blood.

From the kitchen, Sharilyn called, "French toast's ready." He sucked his finger and got to his feet.

When he walked into the kitchen, she looked up from the sizzling pan. "What's the matter?"

He walked to the breakfast nook and slid in. He stared at the finger. The surface tension of a new bead of blood was about to break. "My damned computer bit me."

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She looked at him. "Say what?"

"Bit me. The damned computer. It has teeth."

"Chris..."

"I'm not kiddin', Sharilyn. The damned thing grew a tooth and took a nip out of me."

"Oh, come *on*, don't start with me this early. I thought we'd talked out the problem last night."

"This has nothing to do with last night's argument. This is a new thing, and I'd appreciate it if you'd come over here and take a look at my hand before you start telling me I'm losing it. Or go in the other room and check out the keyboard. The H key."

Carrying the pan, she came to him, and looked down. He held up his hand. The finger was starting to glow an unsavory bluish-green. The bead broke and dropped red on the tablecloth. "Hully Jeezus," she said.

"Yeah," he said ruminatively. "Ain't *that* a bitch."

"So what did you stick it with?"

He looked up at her. "You're not getting it, are you? I didn't *stick it* with *any*thing. It *bit* me!" He made certain to emphasize more words than usual in the sentence. For clarity.

"Right," she said, and skimmed the spatula under the French toast, and plopped the food onto his plate. "Right. And a little later today I'll have excessive sex with my microwave oven."

Chris started to reply, caught himself, caught his teeth grinding, caught his upper arm muscles tensing, caught the words that were left over from last night starting to bubble up in his throat...and went to work on the French toast.

The tablecloth had soaked up the spot of blood.

By Saturday, half his fingers had been stippled. Only the thumbs had been spared. Smarted like hell.

At first, the first few days, he had considered getting rid of the damned thing, taking it down to Comp USA and trading up to a 90 MHz Pentium. But by Tuesday, for some reason, he didn't want to do that. Not only because Hartschorn at the mail order house was screaming for the assimilated demographics he'd been analyzing, but because...well...he'd gotten used to the machine biting him. It wasn't painful any longer, just smarted like hell.

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And he seemed to have developed some sort of relationship with the PC. It wasn't anything he'd experienced before. A personal relationship with machinery. He had devised a nickname for his car, of course, a leftover from his teen-age years; and once in a while he'd called the t.v. remote a dumb bastard when the batteries had gone low; but neither his electric razor nor the weed-whacker had ever manifested any interest in establishing a more meaningful relationship with him.

And he had begun to forget things.

"Where did you put that big box of winter clothes from last April?" Sharilyn asked him on Thursday.

"What box of clothes?"

"That big box. Had Bekins on the side. One of the storage boxes from the move. Remember, you said you'd find a place for it?"

He had no idea.

"The winter clothes, fer pity's sake!" Sharilyn yelled. Her temper had grown shorter and shorter with him lately. He was beginning to think they were heading for *bad* times, very bad times. Maybe a breakup, maybe a divorce, maybe worse. He had no idea what *worse* could mean, but he was feeling a vague disquiet constantly now, a sense that their time together was being razored to an end.

"I'll look for them," he said, and got up from the computer to go do just that. She turned away, and he watched her go, and then — without realizing it — sat down at the keyboard again.

Hours later, screaming and in tears, she came back and told him he could take that big Bekins storage box, if he ever found it, and jam it up his spreading ass!

The razor was beginning to strike bone.

The computer had grown larger. It seemed to be bursting out of its metal case. The word *bloated* came to mind. Chris had begun to perceive a strange, almost lopsided aspect to the machine, as if it were off-balance, from the shifting of weight, the addition of new cargo. And it continued to take sips from his hands. And he was forgetting many things now. Not the least of which was the precise moment when Sharilyn had left.

He knew she was gone, because he couldn't find her anywhere in the house. But he couldn't exactly parse the circumstances that had driven her

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away. Had it been one of the fights? Or the fact that he sat before the PC night and day now, growing paler, getting foggier in the mind with each passing hour? Could it have been that? Or perhaps it was the moment she came downstairs and saw him feeding one of the neon tetras to the computer. Perhaps it was that moment. Maybe not. He couldn't remember.

The house was always silent.

Cobwebs refused to grow.

He sat in darkness, the only light provided by the monitor — a sickly blue-green abyss across which fleeting sighs and portents scuttled like crippled creatures. The figures and letters would bump against the perimeter of the screen, fumble for a moment as if lost in the wilderness, and then run back into the center of the information field, where they would vanish with tiny squeals.

Chris worked with his eyes closed most of the time. He had lost the need to see what the computer was asking. But through his fingertips the machine drank and drank, never seeming to slake its thirst, never seeming to get its fill. Bloated and cockeyed in shape, but always sucking from Chris whatever he had left.

He tried to remember when his mother had died. He knew she was gone...just as others had gone...but he couldn't exactly say who those others were. Yet he remembered her face. The sweetest smile. And a phrase she used to say:

"Woof woof a goldfish."

It meant nothing, really; but she would use it when he — or anyone — was coming on too strong, being a bully, threatening in some silly way, like a guy in a car on the street who thought he had been cut off, making insulting remarks. His mother, with that sweet sweet smile, would lean out and say, "Woof woof a goldfish!" It was so much nicer than giving someone the finger. He loved his mother. Where was she?

He called out, but there was no answer. The house was silent.

In the third week since first blood had been drawn, the computer began to speak to him. But he couldn't understand a word it said. And the voice made his head hurt. Like a huge empty auditorium in which *taiko* drummers played endlessly.

Two days later, a thunderstorm hit the tri-state area with a power and a ferocity that reminded old-timers of the great storm of 1936. And the dam

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stopped producing electricity when a spike of lightning as thick as a city block hit the transformer station; and the power went out; and the computer went dead. Or dormant.

It continued to glow, that diseased bluish-green color, but it wasn't alert, it wasn't breathing as deeply, it wasn't draining him. It went somnolent, torpid, waiting.

Chris felt like a junkie going into terminal withdrawal. He fell from the ergonomic chair, and lay on his side for hours. The pain in his head, and the pain in his hips, and the pain in his hands — radiating all the way to his shoulders — left him paralyzed. Lying there cuculiform, curled like a conch shell, absent the sound of any living sea.

For hours the storm raged around the house, battering and lashing the windows with the malevolence of ancient enemies. And by morning, when light crept through the sooty windows, Chris crawled to the bathroom and ran water into the tub and managed to drag himself over the porcelain lip and fell face-forward into the freezing ocean. He thought he'd die!

The pain was excruciating, shadowlines of agony racing down from his eyes and cheeks into his neck, paralyzing his upper body, disemboweling him, reducing him to the jelly cold of infinite vacuum. He tried to struggle out of the tub, lurching back with his shoulders, trying to get purchase with his scrabbling feet against the tiles of the bathroom. His head and upper body were submerged, his torso half-in, half-out of the tundra oblivion. He screamed, there in the water, and bubbles, only bubbles broke the surface. He wrenched himself back, thrashing, managing to get one arm outside the tub, over the enamel edge. But it was enough.

He fell to the floor, teeth chattering, eyes white and rolled up in his head like shrunken scrotums, like brine shrimp left in the desert. He passed out, and it was sweet relief.

He thought he remembered his mother's smile.

IT WAS NIGHT again. He could see the blind eyes of the living room windows from where he lay on his side on the carpet. The only light in the room was from the computer. It had tried to crawl to him, to feed, but the power had been off for too long. Had it been a day, two...three days or a week...? Chris had no idea. He felt dehydrated, and hurting in every paper-thin plane of his skin.

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It had to have been more than a few days, because he was so weak he couldn't move. He tried, and only a finger spasmed. But then, he had been drained *before* the storm had smashed them, and lying here for an endless time would only have emptied him the more.

He could see the PC, over there, halfway between its work-station and his twisted body. It had come down off the ledge, had managed to get partway toward him and then had, itself, collapsed.

Its mouth was open, glittering blue-green bytes drooling from its fanged aperture.

Chris knew something was wrong; something was wrong with *him*. He should not be lying on the carpet, he should not be weak, he should be frightened of that machine over there.

But he couldn't remember.

Couldn't remember who he was, or why he was here, or what he should be doing. To save himself. To rise. To think about matters that mattered. There had been people, of that he was sure. People who had known him, had cared for him; but he couldn't recall what the words *cared for him* meant.

And he saw the PC trembling.

It inched across the carpet. Slowly, like a broken-backed horse struggling for the cool mud of a ditch. Chris watched it come.

The phosphorescent aura of its passage across the room was like strobe tracers in a long shot of the turnpike. It left a trail, like a slug, glittering and corrosive.

Dragging the umbilicus of its power cord, the three-pronged plug jumping and twitching like a severed chicken body seeking its head, the PC came closer. Chris lay on his side and watched, unable to move, unable to defend himself

What did that mean: *defend himself?*

He thought about it, tried to put the phrase together. Oh, yes, he thought, I know what that means. Defend myself. I know. It means it's time to be fed, and I have to make myself available.

With the strength of a drowning man, he scissored his legs against the carpet, pushing himself across the space between himself and the oncoming computer. The cord twitched and dragged itself behind the carcass of the PC. Chris rolled to one side, out of the computer's path, and shinnied his way in a herky-jerky rolling way till he could get the cord in his mouth. He closed

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his lips around the cord, and continued to roll and frog-kick and drag himself to the wall. The outlet was at eye-level.

He got close to the baseboard, and fainted again.

When he awoke, the computer was close to his feet, and the lights were on in the living room. Oh, wonderful, he thought, now it can feed. Lovely. Lovely.

He drew himself together at the hips, then extended his upper torso, the cord clenched between his teeth, and moved another six inches to the baseboard. And again. And once more. Now he was lying with his cheek against the cool hardwood floor; and the plug lay just below the outlet.

The computer scraped the floor, byte drool etching an acid alphabet in the pegged wood floor. *I'll help you*, Chris tried to whisper. *I'll plug you in and you can drink.*

He didn't understand why the PC was so impatient. He was trying to help. He *would* help, even if the machine *was* being impatient.

With the last of his strength, he dragged his arm around his body, and grasped the plug. He tried ever so hard to raise the plug, to insert the triple prong into the slots and hole. But his strength was gone. He was empty. His head had been sucked dry of all knowledge, his body drained of all energy, his arteries dusty with emptiness. The PC was whimpering at his feet like an asthmatic infant.

Friend, he thought, *my old dearest friend*. He wanted to say, be patient, I'm coming, I'll get you fed yet, I'll set the table and billow the napkin into your lap. Hold on, old friend.

And from some small reservoir of unknown value, some untilled patch of muscle, he found an inch worth of foot-pounds of energy, and he thrust the plug into the power point.

The energy spike exploded straight through the heart of the PC. It had been lurking there in the web, waiting to be tapped, and as the plug drove home, Chris speared the computer with a coruscating spike of energy that blew the feeding keyboard into dust. Chris was showered with sparks. And darkness closed over him again.

When he came to, he was lying curled in a foetal rictus, every fiber of his body crying for a soft breeze, a gentle touch. But he could think...he could reason.

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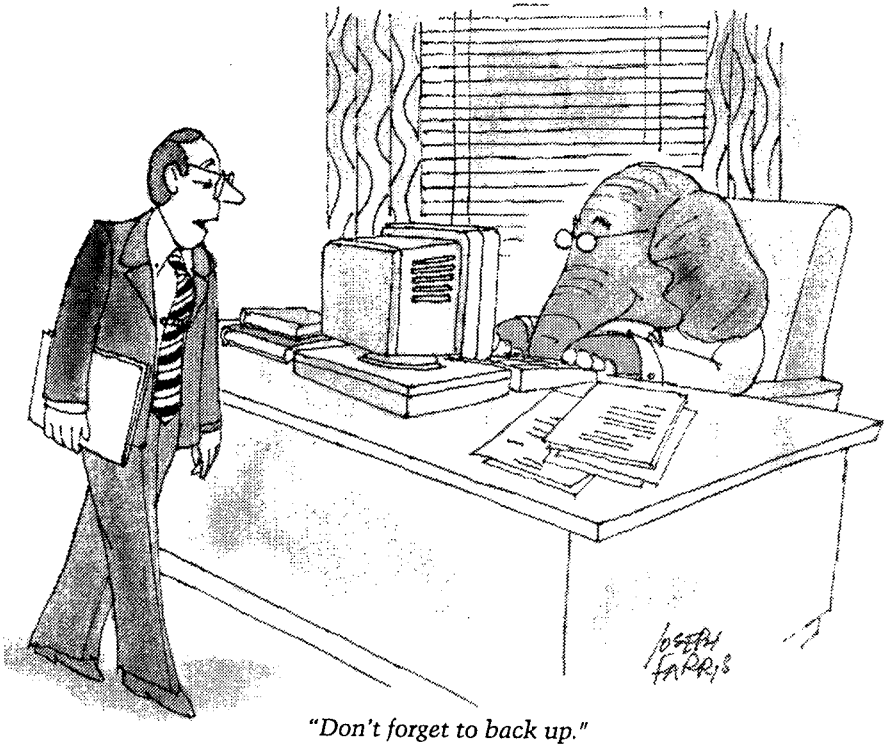
And he knew what had happened to him. The long banquet that had transpired in this dark house. Sharilyn was gone, his family was gone, and he had very nearly been taken.

But now, by chance, he had saved himself. Unknowing, without sense or purpose, he had saved himself from the thing that drank, the device that dined. He would begin to crawl toward the kitchen, to pull down a box of saltines, to kick the table and make a desiccated tangerine fall from the bowl up there. He would live. By chance, but yes, he would live. And it was chance that lived on the side of human reason. Always.

Nothing of the insensate hungering world could defeat a thinking entity, a creature of breezes and sweet smiles.

Then he heard the sound of lips smacking, of soft and distressing music; and he stared across the living room.

The television licked its lips and winked at him.



"Don't forget to back up."

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Adam-Troy Castro's fiction gets attention. His first published short story, "Clearance to Land," from Pulphouse: A Hardback Magazine *has been reprinted twice. His story "The Last Robot," a much-talked-about (and touching) tribute to Isaac Asimov, appeared in the first issue of* Science Fiction Age. *Adam has published over thirty short stories, mostly in anthologies such as* Journeys to the Twilight Zone *and* The Ultimate Witch. *His first short story collection,* Lost in Booth Nine, *was published in 1993 by Silver Salamander Press.*

"Ego to Go" marks Adam's debut in F&SF.

Ego to Go

By Adam-Troy Castro

ARTEMUS FEEBLE'S GREATEST asset as a Persona Tailor had always been his ability to know what the customer needed at first glance. Not merely what the customer wanted — that was easy. But knowing what the customer *needed:* that was a different knack entirely, one that marked the dividing line between the merchant and the artist.

His talents had served him well over the years; he'd moved from humble beginnings sculpting trendy neuroses for the Soho crowd, to his humble but lucrative sinecure in the Megalopolis Galleria, where he set up shop after that vast shopping mall elected a governor and declared statehood. True, his store was just a hole in the wall, really, tucked between an anal hypnotist and an endorphin bar; and he deliberately kept it tacky to honor the long and distinguished tradition of talented backstreet tailors — but the grunge was as much a simulation as his stooped back and liver-spotted scalp. Anybody who sampled his work knew that Feeble was among the best.

Take the pudgy man who wandered in at 17:37 Metriday afternoon.

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Feeble pegged him as the sort of man who felt embarrassed all the time, by everything he said or did, and therefore tried to be as anonymous as possible. At this the poor fellow ultimately failed; though he'd stuffed himself into the kind of suit designed to be invisible against any background (a suit of real cloth, not see-thru plastic or holographic projection), the powerful blush that had taken up permanent residence on his cheeks made his face stand out like a searchlight. Feeble registered all that, and, incongruously, the man's eyes (which were a remarkably bright shade of blue he couldn't recall ever having seen before — the kind of blue that even the sky itself achieved only in poetry written by shy thirteen-year-old girls), before he turned his attention back to the flashily dressed young lady already standing at his formica counter. "It's up and running," he said, in his usual yiddish intonation. "If you ever need any adjustments, let me know."

The young lady flashed an improbably dazzling smile and floated out the battered wooden doorway on wings of pure bliss. The pudgy man watched her until she disappeared up the gleaming escalator to the garden level. "S-she looks happy."

"She is, now. Deliriously. She'll never be in a bad mood again. She'll never even be cranky. She'll also be incredibly annoying, but there's always a trade-off. And you, mister? How may I help you?"

The pudgy man dabbed his forehead with a sonic hankie, which emitted a chorus of high-pitched squeaks as the sweat beads vaporized. "Well, I, uh...hmmmm. This is embarrassing."

"I'm not surprised," Feeble said. "Let's start with your name, shall we?"

"Porter," the pudgy man ventured, in the quaver of a man never at rest even in his own skin. Almost at once he licked his lips, turned a sickly fishbelly-white, and looked away, studying the various low-rent furnishings of Feeble's miniscule waiting room — the three folding chairs, the standing ashtray gray with recent ash, and the coffee table covered with issues of *Personality Today*. "I mean, Wallace? Wallace Porter? I was — I mean, I was told to come here by somebody I work with? Annie, I mean, Annette Crosby? You know her?"

"Certainly," Feeble said. Annette was one of his regular customers: the parthenogenic only child of virtual sex magnates Janet and Enid Crosby, who liked to stop by over lunch to pick up an adorable giggle or temporary Parisian accent for a dinner engagement. Feeble liked Annette, even when she was

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being fashionably unlikeable. He fingered the ratty tape measure he wore around his shoulders as an old-fashioned badge of office, adjusted his traditional bifocals, and prompted, "She sent you here?"

"Yes, I, uh, was, sort of, apologizing to her, for uh, something I'd said to her the week before, that I wasn't entirely sure she hadn't taken the wrong way, because, uh, I don't really want to give offense, because I'm not that kind of person, and, uh, she sort of gave out this big loud sigh and said that I should come here. She, uh," Porter's blush was now as bright red as a Caribbean sunset, "said I should buy an Ego."

"She's right. You need one."

Porter looked like he would have been happier cowering under the musty carpeting with the rest of the insects. "I'm sorry."

Feeble slammed his fist against the countertop, raising a mushroom cloud of carefully placed dust. "Don't apologize! That's the major problem with people like you — you're always apologizing! You believe that every single move you make causes the world mortal offense, and therefore you either shy away from doing anything even remotely self-assertive, or fall all over yourself making excessive amends for words and deeds that never really required amends in the first place. In the process, you reduce yourself to a forgettable cipher at best and a major-league annoyance at worst. For God's sake, Mr. Porter, we're not living in medieval times, when people actually had to live with a handicap like that! Why didn't you get this fixed long ago?

Porter addressed an invisible person somewhere in the vicinity of his plain brown shoes. "I'm s — I mean, I guess I never realized it was a problem."

"You treat yourself like a criminal and you never realized it was a problem?"

"I guess I thought I deserved it," said Porter.

Feeble appraised him critically, then disappeared behind the deliberately tacky curtain (faded flowers in a shade of old tobacco stains), into the dimly lit closet, returning with a metallic disk that reflected the single overhead bulb with a burst of incandescent color that bounced rainbows off the beads of sweat on Porter's forehead. "Here. Try this on."

Porter's eyes bugged.

"Surely this can't be your first prosthetic!"

"No," Porter said, in the awed tones of a man reliving a long-forgotten horror. "When I was two years old, I was last in my class to learn Differential

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Calculus. My parents fitted me with a 75-G Sony Prosthetic Genius for Math. They didn't remove it until I was seven. It was years before I learned to communicate with other people without using polynomials."

"That was a less enlightened age," Feeble assured him. "I myself was a spectacularly unlikeable child and was almost ruined for life by a prosthetic Cute. But these days we know how to properly adjust the prosthetic to the individual personality. We can even implant them subdermally so nobody knows you're wearing them. Go ahead. Try it."

Porter nodded wanly and placed the disk on his forehead. All at once his entire bearing changed. He stood up straight — gaining two inches of height in the process — shrugged his shoulders experimentally, and for the very first time, smiled. "Wow."

"You're a wimp," Feeble said, his face rippling with waves of palpable disgust. No longer Yiddish, he delivered words resonant with echoes, like the voice of God in old Bible movies. Beams of blue light burst from the walls on both sides, turning his cheekbones to caverns and rendering him monstrous. "A nerd. A loser. A butthead. A weiner. A dope. A waste of oxygen. A sloth with a human face. If you were worth twenty times what you're worth now you'd still be a worthless slug."

Porter's face fell. "You really think so?"

The blue light receded. "I think you need a more powerful model," Feeble said, sans echo, his voice suddenly Yiddish again. He plucked the disk off Porter's forehead, disappeared through the curtains, then returned bearing another disk which he applied where the first one had been. "Boy, are you pathetic. I mean, jeez, I look at some of the gobs of human waste who come shuffling in here on their hind legs and I think they're pretty hard to take, but you, mister, you're a — "

Porter hauled off and punched him. Or tried to, anyway; Feeble's personal force-field engaged as soon as it sensed the onrushing fist, deflecting it harmlessly into the empty air by Feeble's side. Even as Porter tried to regain his balance, Feeble was plucking the prosthetic from his forehead. All at once Porter's face fell again: "Oh, dear. I'm sorry. Did I — "

Feeble waggled his index finger, which was yellow from tobacco smoke and had altogether too many joints to look comfortable on any human hand. (He'd had it reconfigured twenty years earlier, so he'd look more formidable lecturing people.) "Didn't I tell you not to apologize? — This is all part of the

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fitting process. It seems we have a slight problem in your case, Mr. Porter; you've abused yourself so much that you've created an incredible deep-rooted anger. Any attempt to give you an Ego will unleash that anger and create, instead of a fuller, happier human being, a serious menace to himself and others."

Porter tried to shrink to the size of a period on a printed page. "I'm s —"

"Oh, please, give it a rest. This isn't an insoluble problem; people in my profession encounter it fairly frequently. What you need, Mr. Porter, in addition to a new Ego, is an outlet for all that anger. Something that will vent your rage in a socially acceptable way. Perhaps..." He drummed his fingers, including the extra-long one, on the countertop. Wherever he drummed, nanotech carefully replaced the dust immediately, to preserve the impression of sloppy genius. He said, "A Talent, maybe?"

"I, uh, don't have a lot of money..."

"You don't need much, Mr. Porter. Talent's cheap...historically, one of the cheapest things you can buy. And considering the sheer amount of angst you carry around on your back, you need it. After all, angst from a Talented person is fascinating; angst from a Common Everyday Nobody is just an annoyance. — Hmmm. Let's see. I could equip you with a standard Knack for Playing the Blues, but then you'd have to buy an instrument, and you said you were on a budget..." Feeble drummed his fingernails some more, then brightened. "I've got it. Poetry."

"I think I'm too self-conscious to be a poet..."

Feeble chuckled. "A more unusual sentence I've never heard. Besides, on your budget, you won't be a good one. In fact, the Prosthetic I have in mind is a rather old model, which is only good for Post-Modern Acrostic Haiku. You won't want to show any of it to anybody. But once every couple of weeks or so you'll scribble some doggerel into a notebook, and save that notebook on disk, and you'll feel that you've purged the pit of festering despair at the darkest corner of your soul."

"Pit of Festering Despair?"

"Don't have one of those, either, eh? Well, worst comes to worst, I can always equip you with one. Anyway," Feeble said, as he put the first disk back on Porter's forehead, "here's your Ego, and here," he said, as he placed another disk on top of that one, "Here's your Talent. And now, I want you to know that you've made an incredible fool of yourself throughout this entire conversation."

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"Yeah," Porter said derisively. "Right." And then he brightened immediately. "Hey! It works! I asserted myself without excess anger and didn't feel even remotely guilty about it! What a tremendous relief after an entire lifetime of self-denial! I should have bought a prosthetic long ago!"

"I agree," said Feeble, "though you should also realize that your prostheses have yet to be tested in your everybody life and thus cannot be said to be 100 perscent adequate to your particular circumstances. The vast majority of my customers come back for adjustments."

"Nuts to that! This is a brand-new me talking here! I've got vim and vigor! I've got pep and zowie! I don't need anything but my faith in myself!"

Feeble nodded. "Very well," he said. He pressed a button under the counter, summoning the implantation chair from its recessed home in the ceiling. "Let's implant them and write up your order."

IT WAS A week later. The mall was stringing brightly colored banners for its yearly independence celebration. The public-address systems were playing a grunge-muzak version of the Minnesota-Wisconsin War. Feeble had spent the past hour administering to a bulky young man whose relationship with his girlfriend had suffered due to his appalling lack of emotional vulnerability. As it happened, the young man had no reason to be emotionally vulnerable; he'd lived an uncommonly happy life, irritatingly devoid of formative angst. There weren't even any Deep Shameful Secrets in his Past. Feeble had accordingly equipped him with one. From now on, whenever the young lady in question mentioned Thursday, the young man would automatically flash a startled look filled with the pain of sudden remembrance, look away dramatically, and, while steadfastly denying that anything was wrong, speak in a hesitant stutter utterly at odds with his normally ebullient personality. The young man didn't see how such a tiny thing could save their relationship, but Feeble assured him the mystery would drive her wild; and he definitely knew what he was talking about, because he'd fitted the young lady with an Inquisitive Streak only two weeks earlier.

He was ringing up the young man's purchase when Brad Porter entered. Porter had changed in the past week — the nondescript clothes he'd been wearing on his last visit had been replaced by an ensemble that went beyond flashy into the realm of the egregiously loud. His jacket was tailored from a

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silvery material upon which scenes from post-modernist porn, projected via fiber-optics from a tape player secreted in an inside pocket, faded in and out in a smoky montage of noir chic. Yet neither this outrageous fashion statement nor his stylish holoshades, which shot successive bolts of multicolored lightning at the open air before him, succeeded in hiding the unhappy soul behind the flamboyant mask.

To preserve the shreds of the poor man's dignity, Feeble didn't let on that he saw through his pose at once. "Yes, sir! How's your new personality treating you?"

"Terrific!" Porter exclaimed, in the kind of flamboyant delivery used by actors playing to the thirty-fifth row. "For the first time in my life I feel perfectly comfortable with myself! I am completely in charge of my own destiny! I'm a real firebrand filled with zest and enthusiasm!"

"What's the problem, then?"

"With me? Absolutely nothing! I'm a great conversationalist and a wonderful human being! Every social gathering I attend should consider itself fortunate that I'm there! Unfortunately," Porter said, the cloud that passed over his smug self-satisfied expression perfectly at home next to the lightning storm of his holoshades, "I've also been told everybody thinks I'm a self-centered creep."

Feeble bit the tip off a fresh cigar, spit it into the dark corner where it joined a small mound of predecessors already being consumed by simulated roaches. "I was afraid of this. You see...Brad...you do call yourself Brad now, don't you?...a personality is like a suit of clothes. It can look wonderful on the mannequin, but unless it's properly fitted to the individual, it's just poorly tailored cloth. And while your peers might have found your current level of self-appreciation perfectly appropriate for a man truly as remarkable as you now consider yourself, they're unable to tolerate the same level of egocentrism from somebody who isn't all that special at all."

More bad news and Porter might have collapsed into a semiliquid puddle on Feeble's dusty floor. "Can you help me?"

"Of course." Feeble fingered the activator at the tip of his cigar and blew out a small cloud of malodorous synth-smoke. "Here at Feeble's, the customer's satisfaction is our top priority. The question is, just how do we tackle this problem? Do we merely modulate your Ego so it's less irritating? Admittedly, that might make you easier to take — but it won't address the

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real core of the problem, which is that when all is said and done you really don't have a lot to be egotistical about."

"That can't be true! My Haiku alone — "

"First rule of human social interaction, Mr. Porter: If you have to lead with Haiku, you've already lost."

"But you're the one who — "

Feeble dismissed the previous week with a wave of a hand. "Last week we fixed a symptom. But you need more than confidence, Brad. Something actually valued by society as a whole. Something that would make your self-admiration a logical outgrowth of your own actual worth. Something, in short, that will render you a valued commodity in the commerce of interpersonal relations."

Porter removed his mirrorshades, revealing eyes that, this time out, bespoke a deeply troubled soul beneath the flashy, self-confident exterior. "Something expensive, in other words."

Feeble shrugged. "You want a quick fix, buy your prosthetics from a vending machine. There's a Slick Charm dispenser on Mall Level Twelve. But people are sophisticated. First time the conversation turns to something substantive, they'll be able to spot you as the phony you are. It takes a top-of-the-line prosthetic to make people leap from their chairs, clap their hands over their chests, and exclaim, By God! That Porter Fella's A Titan Among Men, Somebody I Feel Damn Privileged to Know."

"Right now," Porter said glumly, "given the current state of my finances after last week's fitting, I'll settle for a budget prosthetic and not being universally despised."

"As you wish. You can always upgrade." Feeble looked around for an ashtray, found none, then placed the cigar at the tip of his counter to let it flake spent ash onto his carpet. "Hmmm. You said it was Ms. Crosby who first directed you to this establishment. Is she your closest friend at your place of employment?"

"I don't have any close friends there," said Porter, "but she is one of the few who don't run shrieking from the sight of me."

"And does she concur with the common opinion that you're a self-centered, egotistical creep?"

"She told me just this morning that she does. — In the friendliest possible way, of course."

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Feeble's gaze went deep and penetrating. "And how friendly can that be, Brad?"

Porter colored. Lowered his eyes. Dug his hands into his pockets and bashfully kicked at his heels. "You had to be there."

"I see. — Well, sir, since she's the closest thing you have to a friend, you must know a lot about her. Tell me, is she happy in her job? Does she have any pets? What does she do for fun in her spare time? What's the one thing she'd do differently if she had her life to live over? How's her health? Is she married? Has she ever had a brain-rinse? Did she ever indulge in sentient fusion? Do you know the answers to any of these questions? Even one of them, Mr. Porter?"

"Of course not. Why would I care?"

"She's right, Brad. You are a self-centered, egotistical creep."

"Hey!"

Feeble raised both hands in mock surrender. "Don't take it personally, my good man. That's a professional diagnosis. And right now it's my professional opinion that you've been wrapped up in your own problems so long, without break, that you don't have even the slightest clue how to show an interest in anybody other than yourself."

Porter wore the expression of a man who's just learned he was wearing his underwear outside his pants. "Really?"

"Don't blame yourself." Feeble patted him on the shoulder in sympathy. "It takes the average person half a lifetime to develop the knack, and even then it usually comes off as forced and unnatural. But with the proper prosthetic in place, you can be a warm and caring individual artificially, without the nurturing life experiences that inefficiently take years to make you one. Here," he said, placing a disk on Porter's forehead. "This is a Sanyo GZ-57 Prosthetic Empathy. How do you feel?"

"Is it on yet?" Porter asked.

"Yes. Highest possible setting. How do you feel?"

"The same."

"Maybe it doesn't work. The quality control is—" And then Feeble's face contorted, becoming a tormented parody of itself. "ARRRRGH!"

Porter's eyes widened in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Just some...heartburn...my..." Feeble fell to his knees. "ARRRGHHHH!"

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Porter leaped over the counter in a single bound, landing beside Feeble with the silent grace of a jungle cat. "You can't fool me, Feeble! That's not heartburn, that's a massive coronary! Isn't it? ISN'T IT?"

Feeble's mouth worked silently for all of ten seconds before he managed to get out the word. "...yes..."

"I'm taking you to the hospital right now!"

"...no...don't..." Feeble went three shades paler and fell the rest of the way to the ground, in the kind of death scene that every actress who ever played Camille might have envied. "...you have your own problems..."

Porter cradled him in his arms and rocked back and forth as he declaimed his infinite caring to the heavens. "Damn my petty little problems! They're not important, anyway! You're a fellow human being in distress and you take precedence!"

"Of course," Feeble said, in a normal tone of voice, the color returning to his cheeks even as he continued to gaze up at Porter's pathetically concerned face, "this is just a demonstration. I once tested this little beauty myself, by wearing it as I paged through a magazine looking at the save-the-children ads. Were I not also wearing a Prosthetic Cheap Bastard just as a precaution, I'd right this very minute be supporting a family of twelve on the Mars colony."

"Let me help you up anyway," said Porter.

"You don't have to."

"No, I insist."

"I'm telling you you don't have to. I can get up by myself."

"But you've gone to so much trouble, I feel so bad for you..."

"I think we're going to have to use a lower setting," Feeble decided, as he lithely jumped to his feet and physically thrust the hovering customer from his side. "If you show too much concern for the feelings and concerns of others, they consider you intrusive and once again come to the conclusion that you're a self-centered creep."

"I don't care what they think about me," Porter declared fervently, an unnerving messianic light shining from his remarkably blue eyes, "as long as they're comfortable with themselves."

"Oh, please." Feeble reached out and switched off the prosthetic. "If I let you walk out of this store acting like that, I'd never have another customer again. — I suppose you'll be more-or-less okay if along with the Prosthetic

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Empathy we also implanted a Prosthetic Reasonable Sense of Perspective to keep you from getting obnoxious about it. That will be more expensive, of course, but even so..." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Swaying slightly, Brad regarded him with an expression very close to terror. "Yes?"

"Frankly, Brad, you have one of the most seriously deficient personalities I've ever encountered. Even if we draw the line at the Prosthetic Reasonable Sense of Perspective, and it works for you, then that still means it's taken four major prosthetics just to make you even minimally tolerable. I say we shouldn't settle for that. As long as we're getting up into that price range anyway, I say we dispense with the expensive band-aids, declare your old personality a dead loss, and install a complete brand-new one direct from the factory in Tel Aviv. I'll even give you a generous payment plan, and credit you the full purchase price of the prosthetics I've already intalled. What do you say?"

"Can I have a week to think it over?"

With one smooth, efficient movement, Feeble pressed a Prosthetic Decisiveness to Porter's forehead.

Porter's jaw set, becoming an iron thing that even cannonballs couldn't have dented. "Let's do it."

Feeble smiled. "Let's."

A year later, Feeble was in his store adding a new line of Laughter Enhancers to the window display, when the dashing and heroic Lash Porter strode in like the titan of a man he was. Porter had lost all his previous pudginess over the past few months, gaining in its place a muscle tone well-suited to his safari jacket, jhodpurs and pith helmet. His steely blue gaze and determinedly set jaw bespoke a man of action well-versed in the harsh laws of jungle survival. But his was not an entirely grim soul, either — for even as he saw Feeble his heroic eyes lit up with the joy of a man as unsparingly generous with his friends as he was unstintingly cruel to his enemies. "Artemus!" he exclaimed jovially. "Can you spare a drink for a thirsty man?"

"Always for you, Lash." Feeble set a shot glass on the table and poured Lash a quick one.

Porter tossed it back, said, "Ahhhhhh!" and slammed the empty glass to the counter.

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"How's life treating you, Lash?"

"Could be worse, my friend. Annette and I have finally set the date. We'll be getting married en route to our villa in subtropic Antarctica."

Feeble clapped Porter on the back. "Mazeltov!"

"Yes," Porter said dreamily, looking past Feeble, past the walls of Feeble's establishment, to some vision of perfect happiness known only to him, "she says that I come very close to being the man she's dreamed of all her life. —Though she could use a little work herself. I've asked her to stop by so you can give her a Sense of Humor. She doesn't get any of my jokes."

"I'll give her the top of the line," Feeble promised.

"And she's always cranky when she first wakes up. I've always been a morning person, so maybe you can work on that too."

"It would be my pleasure," Feeble said gravely. "And you, Lash? Are you shopping for yourself as well?"

Porter retrieved a sheet of paper from his breast pocket. The sheet had been folded four times, but Feeble could tell even so that it was covered on both sides with many, many words in a cramped feminine handwriting. Porter unfolded it carefully, smoothed out the creases, and started to read. "Neatness. Table Manners. Punctuality. An Interest in Opera. An Appreciation for Fine Art and French Food. An Encyclopaedic Knowledge of the World's Great Wines. An Affection for Cats. More Tolerance for her Explosive Meditation Techniques. Tact When Dealing With Her Mothers. More Stamina When..."

"Whoa!" Feeble put out both hands in mock surrender. "That's going to cost quite a bit, Lash! Are you sure you have the budget for all that?"

"Annette's mothers are paying. It was a condition of our engagement."

"Ahhhhhhh." Feeble nodded. "Sounds like the young lady knows what she wants."

Porter placed the sheet of paper on Feeble's countertop. "She always did. She says she wanted me from the moment we first met. My eyes, you see."

"I see," said Feeble, though of course, with his years of experience in the trade, he wasn't exactly surprised. He grabbed the list, scanned it quickly, saw that it contained any number of items that even he would have never considered, and heaved the sigh of a man who knew his work was cut out for him. "Well, then! We better get started. Since this is going to take a while, and you are by far my best customer, I'll just close up shop, so we can take our time with this."

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"Thank you," Porter said humbly.

Feeble came around the counter, pulled the fly-specked shades, activated the CLOSED sign in the window, then pressed the button that summoned the reclining Implantation Chair from its recess in the ceiling. But just as Porter climbed aboard and grinned at him expectantly, Feeble paused, a strange expression on his face. "Lash?"

"What?"

"Before we do this, I want to say I admire you."

"Me?" Porter's heroic visage twisted in surprise. "Why? You're the one responsible for the man I am today."

"Not at all," said Feeble. "The truth of the matter, Lash — and I'll deny this if you repeat it to anybody, since the entire profession lives in fear of people finding this out — is that personality is nothing more than a shallow mask we show the world. Even when we add to it, or subtract from it, or rebuild it from the ground up, or, as in your case, raze it to the ground and then replace it entirely, we like to think we don't touch the soul itself. And I can't help admiring a soul brave enough to re-invent himself so completely."

Porter smiled and shook his head. "You're so full of crap, Feeble. Bravery doesn't enter into it."

"No? What would you call it, then?"

"I did it for Annette," he said. "The only woman I ever met who loved me for *myself*."

Feeble smiled then, though for just an instant — an instant he very carefully hid from the man who now called himself Lash — the smile was neither friendly nor professional, but sad and wan.

Then he activated the chair and made Porter a brand new man.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

SUMMER OF THE SCAVENGERS AND CANNIBALS

HOLLYWOOD is oft described as the kind of wicked town where they'd eat their own young. But it's worse than that. The American film industry is a colony of corporate cannibals who regularly eat their own *dead*. At least, that's how I would characterize recent practices among the "idea" men of the movies.

As we all know, Hollywood has been in love with the sequel for the last fifteen years or so. If a studio made serious money on a movie, they'd try to make the same movie over again. And again. And again. The concept may have run out of gas years before — it may, in fact, be a rusting, stripped shell abandoned at the old drive-in — but that has never stopped Hollywood.

And speaking of rusting, empty shells, the big-screen *Robocop* is a perfect example. It has been a steady downward slide for that tin man with an attitude. Yes, action master Paul Verhoeven and screenwriters Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner created a movie worth seeing back in '87. It had more than explosions and gunfire and a big shiny lug of a hero going for it. It actually showed some originality and a good deal of satiric social humor.

But the creators of Robocop were gone by the time *Robocop II* came along. And with them went most of the story's bite and energy. By the fall of '93, another robocopy cat rolled off the line. And even star Peter Weller had enough self-respect not to show up for that one. *Robocop 3* director Fred Dekker and his co-writer, Frank Miller, seemed not to understand anything about the efficacious use of humor in such a gimmicky action flick, but, by gum, they oiled up that rusty chassis and tried to make it run one more time anyway! What they—

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and we — ended up with was a pile of junk.

Sequels are bad news. But at least they seem to have run their course...for now. These days, a worse problem is the surfeit of remakes inflicted upon us. There are the obvious ones. (Excuse me, *how* many versions of *Body Snatchers* do we actually need, guys?) Then there are the more inconspicuous remakes. For example, on the assumption that Americans never see international films, Hollywood has developed the nasty habit of remaking foreign — usually French — films (e.g., *Three Men and a Baby*, *Point of No Return* and this summer's Cameron/Schwarzenegger ultra-action flick, *True Lies*).

One way or the other, Hollywood continues to send in the clones. A movie remake is a pathetic excuse for a new movie. But just when you think they've hit rock bottom, Hollywood tumbles a little further. Now, these scavengers have begun a feeding frenzy on *old dead television shows*. A few little-to-big-screen remakes, like last year's summer hit, *The Fugitive*, have robbed the graves of TV dramas. But the majority of Hollywood's twice-told TV tales have feasted on the corpses of situation comedies. Yes, we're talking about two hours of derivative drivel that rips off the stupidest products ever to spring from American boob-tube culture.

Okay, I admit that I enjoyed the *Addams Family* movies, but this trend has gotten completely out of control. (Mel Gibson as *Maverick*? Puleeze!) Can TV nostalgia flicks really be the only movies capable of appealing to both baby boomers and their progeny? I'll grant you the inevitability of *Batman*, but when they start making feature films out of the likes of *Car 54, Where are You?*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *Dennis the Menace*, you know that we're in trouble.

Which brings us to *The Flintstones*, as dumb a movie as it has ever been my misfortune to see. Yeah, I know, *The Flintstones* was always silly — was designed to be silly. And I could accept that — when it was a half hour cartoon. As a kid, I had fun watching those piffling tales of paleolithic life that told us absolutely nothing about early humanity, but which inadvertently told us something, instead, about American attitudes toward suburbia in the early '60s.

So, of course, Hollywood had to take an old show that (in its own *Honeymooners*-in-animal-skins fashion) worked, and bust it to bits like so much rock at the Slate Quarry.

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It is a highly questionable concept to start with, to hire live actors — some of them actually talented — to run around doing weak impersonations of bad animation. But the real sinkhole was taking a flimsy cartoon storyline and attempting to stretch it from twenty to ninety-two minutes.

It would take a genius to expand something as inconsequential as a *Flintstones* plot to feature length. And none of the thirty-two writers who are acknowledged contributors to the screenplay of *The Flintstones* exhibited any super-intelligence. Or extraordinary wit, for that matter. Puns relating to rocks and primordial ooze seem to be about as clever as these gag writers get — "Hey, why don't we name the femme fatale of the piece Sharon Stone!" — and even then, most of the puns are merely product placements in disguise — from a RocDonald's restaurant to an Aproca stroller to Gorge Lucas's *Tar Wars* at the local drive-in.

It all makes for a poor substitute for a feature film, but with enough pre-release hype and product tie-ins, the folks at Universal were hoping none of us would notice. Sadly, few of us did. Or, rather, few of us would *admit* to how disappointing that movie was. I saw *The Flintstones* with a theater full of parents and their kids. I heard a great deal of childish fidgeting and parental scolding, but very little laughter. Still, the publicity machine did such a good job creating false buzz that those frazzled parents probably recommended the film to other families anyway. (And kids today will go see practically anything related to the Happy Meal they had for lunch.)

There are a few nice bits in *The Flintstones*. But, not surprisingly, the best stuff in the film is that which comes closest to reproducing animation: the live-action animitronics. Puppets created at Jim Henson's Creature Shop were supplemented by computer-generated and optical visual effects from Industrial Light and Magic. And the characters the FX blokes created, from a pigasaurus garbage disposal to everybody's favorite pet, Dino, *are* fun to watch.

Fact is, as much as I love John Goodman (and yes, he can get into a Fred groove that almost makes you forget the marvelous voice of Alan Reed), I'd say the best performance in *The Flintstones* is by a puppet. Dictabird, Fred's office equipment, and the key witness to his innocence in an embezzlement frame-up, is a charming character, built by the Henson team, operated by six sensitive puppeteers, and voiced by the great Harvey Korman.

Would that all of the movie could

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have captured the fantastical delight of Dictabird. But, alas, high-tech animitronics cost more than La Liz Taylor, so Dino's antics were kept to a minimum. As a poor substitute, we got to see a great many barefoot actors look quite embarrassed by their own dopey antics.

If they had to excavate the Flintstones, why (oh, why) didn't they leave them, at least, in the realm of *animation* — where there are fewer limits to the imagination and where human characters look just as strange as purple dinosaurs and everybody just naturally acts dopey?

Some questions are unanswerable.

Including: Why did it take the grave robbers of Hollywood so long to exhume *The Shadow*? In a Hollywood almost incapable of developing fresh material, where *Batman* and its sequel recently did such boffo box office, it's a mystery why a major studio didn't crank out a colorful, FX-filled, big-screen remake of the life and times of Lamont Cranston and his crimestopper alter-ego years ago.

A ground-breaking superhero, *The Shadow* was, at first, merely a narrator's voice on the radio. But in March of 1931, Walter B. Gibson (as Maxwell Grant) launched the pulp novel adventures that gave that spooky voice a personality profile. And, to a greater or lesser degree, that beloved Master of Darkness has been a part of our popular culture ever since.

The Shadow has starred in practically every medium, from hundreds of pulp novels to various radio programs to B-movie mysteries to comic books to theatrical serials. And this prototype of the rich sophisticate with a secret life as a social avenger has been played by many actors over the years, including Orson Welles, Bret Morrison, Rod LaRocque, and Victor Jory.

Now Alec Baldwin gets a turn as Lamont Cranston. And it's not a bad bit of casting. Baldwin exudes a kind of streetwise suavity that seems about right for the Knight of Darkness. And as for that psycho tinge to his heroism (and we all *knew* that any movie made about a guy with *that* laugh, in the '90s, would make the most of the sinister shadings of his character), Baldwin can put a mighty cold glint in those pretty eyes of his. (See *Miami Blues* for an indication of what a super sociopath he can be.)

I wanted to say something nice about the casting of Universal's big budget flick, because most of the casting (like the rest of the movie) is, to put it kindly, misguided. Now everyone pictures a favorite charac-

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ter differently, but I can't imagine what the filmmakers were thinking of when they cast Penelope Ann Miller as Cranston's "friend and companion, the lovely Margo Lane."

Miller is nice enough looking—in a wimpy, underfed, strawberry-blonde kind of way. And I'll admit that her hair marcels nicely, and her anemic body looks fine in those satin sheath '30s-style gowns. Nonetheless, she seems all wrong as Margo.

I always pictured Margo with more umph and backbone (despite the fact that she was relegated to damsel in distress status in many of the old stories). And I always pictured her as dark and slightly exotic. In short, my idea of Margo is everything that Penny Miller will never be.

And what about casting the brilliant British actor, Ian McKellen, as Margo's dad, scientist Reinhardt Lane? Really, now. Could you ever believe that those two were related? And what's with hiring Jonathan Winters as Police Commissioner Wainwright Barth? A solid (not to say stolid) character actor would have made more sense. If you're going to use the comic genius of Mr. Winters in a movie, it is cruel to the audience (and also, I suspect, to the zany Jonathan) to restrict him to a few lines of utterly boring dinner-table dialogue.

And dialogue brings us to the real problem with *The Shadow*: the writing. David Koepp (*Jurassic Park, Carlito's Way, Death Becomes Her, The Paper*) may be one of the hottest writers in Hollywood these days, but I fail to see the reason why. For this project, he seemed more interested in constructing a totally evil past for Cranston's Shadow (as a mass-murdering, filthy Tibetan drug lord, called Ying Ko, "the Butcher of Lhasa") than in chronicling his derring-do as a crime-fighter.

The plot of *The Shadow* is trivial. Which is fine when you're talking about a live-action comic...as long as you carry your simple plot along with the snap and crackle of witty talk, punctuated with the pop of thrilling action. Koepp's screenplay has neither going for it.

The tone of the film is quite inconsistent. (This, of course, means that both the writer *and* the director were floundering.) They play one scene as rather ponderous drama, then attempt, a moment later, something on the order of camp humor. At least, that's what I *think* they were going for when Cranston and his yellow menace adversary, Shiwan Khan (John Lone) discuss which branch of Brooks Brothers carries a particular conservative tie.

When the stars of the film —

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little troopers that they are — were doing their publicity junket, talking to any entertainment reporter who would listen, they often enthused about the gorgeous '30s settings and the witty, urbane, "sparkling repartee" of the writing.

Well, they weren't completely lying. *The Shadow* is bloody gorgeous to look at. The deco elegance of the production design is fabulous. (Kudos to Joseph Nemec III.) But as for sparkling repartee — Duh!? Let's see if I can recall a sample for you. Margo to Lamont: "You and I have a connection." Lamont to Margo: "No we don't."

Wow. Those lines sparkle so much it hurt my eyes to copy them down on paper.

It's pretty bad when the most exciting thing the director (Russell Mulcahy, of *Highlander* fame) can think to shoot is the trip of a paper note through a pneumatic tube delivery system. But that was one of the high points of the film, along with a few special effects relating to dreams, fire, and a holy dagger (a la Ray Harryhausen) with a mind of its own.

So little seems to be going on in this movie that Mulcahy tries to distract us with fancy camera angles and swirling, twirling shots. Then, when he finally does get the chance to shoot an action sequence (as when Margo and her dad try to defuse an atomic bomb), he blows it as big as a mushroom cloud.

I didn't *hate The Shadow*. Something this handsome to gaze upon can't be completely worthless. But looks aren't everything. And in movies, they're not even the most important thing. Vivid characters in an imaginative story that manages to surprise and delight you for two solid hours — *that's* what it's all about. And that's something this film just can't deliver.

The Shadow is like a hand-worked golden box, covered with filigree and jewels. It's lovely to behold, but utterly empty inside.

Empty is a feeling I often get from today's movies. Studio execs are so desperate for a sure thing that they resist funding original (and therefore risky) ideas. Instead, they look to the past for heroes that generations of Americans cherish in memory — heroes Hollywood no longer understands. Or, hoping for a high concept with instant recognition and nostalgia appeal, they channel-surf cable stations like *Nick at Night* looking for those brainless, archaic sitcoms that are currently being successfully recycled to a new generation.

But, given a choice, Americans don't want recycled stupidity like *The Flintstones*, or some hollow re-

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membrance of a superhero who is, after "updating," but a *Shadow* of his former self.

There's a reason that *Forrest Gump*, a project that producer Wendy Finerman guided through development hell for nine long years, became (despite dire predictions by industry pundits) the run-away hit of this past summer. And the star power of Tom Hanks and the nifty special effects employed by Robert Zemeckis and his accomplished crews are only part of it.

Unlike most of the rest of the summer's movies, the story of *Forrest Gump* wasn't old news. It wasn't a movie we'd seen a million times before (in weekly episodes and endless reruns). And, whether or not you agree with its implied message that it's a gift to be simple when facing the complexity of modern life, almost everyone who saw the film conceded one thing: Mr. Gump's improbable life story didn't send you away from the theater feeling empty inside.

There's a lesson there. But the scavengers of Hollywood are, I fear, too busy fighting over the graves of *The Brady Bunch* to heed it.

MONA LISA

LETTER BOX EDITION

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Nathan Ballingrud has just moved to New Orleans after a number of years in North Carolina. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and went on to study writing at the Clarion Writer's Workshop in East Lansing, Michigan in 1992. "She Found Heaven" marks his first professional sale.

She Found Heaven

By Nathan Ballingrud

SHE FOUND HEAVEN LYING like a crippled animal by the side of the road. It was small and glowing, and looked rather like a phosphorescent armadillo in the deep-morning darkness. She got out of her car to examine it. She looked up, but the sky was a vast desert of stars, and she could not see the place from which it fell. She poked it with her finger, and it rolled slightly, although she felt no physical substance beneath her touch. She did, however, feel a warmth that coursed through her bones and her blood, and she caught a scent of Ireland, a place she had been once as a child and had never forgotten. She gathered it up in her arms and brought it to the car. She stuck it in the glove compartment so that its light would not reflect off the windshield and interfere with her driving; but the light that bled out around the edges of the glove compartment door, silver and wavering, with the oily ripples of gasoline or of heat rising off pavement, proved to be equally distracting, and she almost died twice when the temptation to gaze upon it stole her attention from the road.

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* * *

A week later she placed an ad in the *St. Petersburg Times*; although her first inclination had been to keep the piece of Heaven (and she was convinced it was only a piece; she could not fathom a Heaven so small and disposable), she felt that it probably belonged to somebody who lost it on the freeway, and she did not want to incur the wrath of God in only her first week in Florida by stealing it.

FOUND:
One piece of Heaven, about a
foot long, slightly crumpled;
call Sally Baxter at 555-8264

Since the Heaven had been found only an hour out of town, she hoped its owner would see the ad and call her. In the meantime, she folded it in half and set it in an old shoebox, which she stored in her closet.

Sally had moved down from Virginia to Florida because she wanted a taste of what she called "real life." She had no solid idea of what this "real life" entailed, but she knew that it must be dirty and filled with Cuban drug dealers. She was twenty-four years old, fresh out of college, and filled with a righteous flame that compelled her to repair all that was damaged in the world. Florida seemed as good a place to start as any, and the beaches didn't hurt.

Hello, you've reached the home of Sally Baxter. I'm not in right now, but if you leave your name and number at the sound of the beep, I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

Beep!

Yeah, uh, this is the lady with the Heaven, right? I'm the guy who lost it. It's like what you said in the paper, it's all crinkled up, and it's pretty short, but still it's mine and I'd like to get it back. My name's Lance Washington, and my number's 555-9038. Call me back as soon as you can, 'cause I need it pretty bad.

Her apartment was small, but it had a large picture window that

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overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. She kept the window open to admit the ocean breeze, which rolled into her apartment carrying the scent of distance and the speeches of pelicans and seagulls. Evening came, and she reclined on her couch so she could watch the changing colors of the sky. As it turned from red to purple, and as the first of the stars lit up behind the clouds, she closed her eyes, and it seemed to her as though the physicality which bound her to the earth fell away in great clumps, and she rose off the couch and drifted out into the night. She floated above the waters, her nightgown billowing in the sky like diaphanous wings, and it was only the light spray of the ocean on her face that kept her from wheeling away into the stars.

Beep!

Yes, hello, my name is Ruth Landis, I'm calling about your ad. I live in a rest home here in northern Tampa, and a friend of mine showed it to me the other day and said I should call. You see, my husband died last month, and I've lost my faith in God. I haven't been able to pray or even read the Bible for weeks now, and when I pass by the church on my way to the store I get to feeling cold. I think you have my Heaven. Please, call me at Westlake Rest Home, and ask for Ruth. They know I'm making this call. They're good people, and they hope I can get my Heaven back, and I just know you were sent from God to give it to me. I almost believe again, just seeing that ad. Call me. I'll be waiting.

Beep!

Yeah, this is Lance Washington, I called yesterday! Maybe you didn't get the message. That Heaven you have is mine, I just know it is. And you know it's not just me, it's my wife and kid too. It's kinda like a communal Heaven, you know! We share it between us, and now we're all without. My kid, she's only seven years old, and she don't understand why her daddy can't get no job. How do you explain that to a seven-year-old kid! All she knows is her daddy goes to the unemployment office every day. And I been married to Alice going on six years, and she ain't once backed down from my side, she ain't once accused me of being a bad father, even though sometimes I gotta do questionable things just so I can put some food on the table, and keep the bills paid up. But she ain't invincible, she can't put up with all this forever. Please, Ms. Baxter, call me back. My number's 555-9038, and I'm desperate. If you want me to beg it from you, I will. If you want money, I'll

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get together what I can. I'm here most of the day. Please call me. I don't know how much longer we can hold out.

Beep!

Um...is anybody there? Um...

Beep!

Is anybody there? Um, my name's Paul, and um...do you still have the Heaven? It might belong to Mom, 'cause she's crying all the time now, and I'm pretty sure if she had it she'd stop. She doesn't know I'm calling you, so don't tell her. She might get mad. Right now she's at the store, um, buying something to drink, so it's okay if I talk for right now, only don't tell her. I think my dad stole the Heaven, and he prob'ly just threw it out the window of his truck, 'cause that's what he does with all his trash. Mom says he's a polluter. Ever since he left all she does is cry, though, and she won't even talk to me anymore, so I think if she could have it back everything would be okay again. It was hers anyway, Dad shouldn't a taken it, but he does stuff like that sometimes. Um...if you could bring it over sometime today, that would be good. Um...bye.

Sally lay naked atop the sheets of her bed, staring at the ceiling. It was night, and it was hot.

There had been fourteen messages on her answering machine that day. She was sweating profusely, drifting in and out of consciousness.

Sometimes it seemed as though other people were in her room, but she could not tell who they were or how long they stayed; they remained a series of vague recollections that dissipated under prolonged scrutiny.

The most insistent of these memories was that of a young woman sitting at her bedside, reaching over occasionally to sprinkle cold water onto her forehead. She was dressed oddly, in long brown rags and white cloth, and she smelled vaguely of manure, but she had a kind, radiant face, and her smile was beautiful. As the woman leaned over her, Sally detected a silvery shine to her cheeks, but she did not know if these were tears or the light of the moon reflecting from her face.

At some point in the night Sally arose from her bed and walked to the small window tucked away above her bureau, and she looked out at the city sprawling below her. It blazed hotly in the darkness, but with a different kind of light than she expected; it was possessed of a frantic radiance that suggested

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fevers or great holes punched through the crust of the earth. And as she looked more closely, pressing her forehead against the cool glass of the windowpane, she saw that these were not city lights at all, but a long, winding procession of torches, each held aloft by a stumbling bearer, tracing a crooked path through the rain.

"Westlake Rest Home."

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Ruth Landis, if I may."

"Oh, yes, hold on one moment. Is this Sally Baxter?"

"Yes."

"Hold on."

Then:

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Landis?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sally Baxter, I had the ad about the Heaven."

"Oh, yes! I called you!"

"I know, I — "

"Do you need directions? Would you like me to meet you somewhere? Or would you rather just mail it? No, I think I'd feel safer if I took it straight from your hands, that way I could thank you in person!"

"Uh, Mrs. Landis — "

"Call me Ruth."

"Okay, Ruth, look, I'm not sure it belongs to you yet."

"...oh."

"I'm sorry, but I've been getting a lot of calls for it, and I need some more information before I can figure out who lost this particular piece. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I suppose so. You can't go around giving it to just anybody."

"No. So, could you, uh, could you describe it to me?"

And she did. She said it was small, about a foot long (she was only an old woman and didn't need much space to move around in), and it had big green winds and smelled of lilacs. It made you feel warm to touch it, she said, and yes, it had probably suffered a little crumpling when it had fallen out of her husband's body, along with his spirit.

Sally sighed and said, "Ruth, I'm not sure this is yours. There aren't any

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big green winds, and I smell no lilacs. On the contrary, when I smell it, I smell Ireland. Have you ever been to Ireland, Ruth?"

"No."

"Oh, it's a lovely place. I was only there once, a long time ago. But this just brings it all back. I remember a house on the beach, and there were big gray rocks all around, and it was always raining. And there was fog everywhere. It was really quite beautiful."

"It sounds desolate to me."

"Well, it's all a matter of perspective, isn't it?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"But the winds of Ireland are gray and chalk-colored, not green."

"You don't smell the lilacs?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Well."

"I'm sorry, Ruth."

"That's...that's all right. It was silly of me to begin with. I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"Oh, you di — "

Click.

And later:

"Hello?"

"Hello, my name is Sally Baxter, I'm calling for Lance Washington."

"Who's this?"

"This is Sally Baxter. Is Mr. Washington there, please?"

"This is his wife."

"Oh, you must be Alice!"

"Why don't you tell me what the hell this is all about before you go usin' my first name."

"Didn't he tell you? I'm the one who placed the ad in the paper."

"I don't read no paper. Lance is the reader in the house. What ad are you talkin' about?"

"The ad about the Heaven? He didn't mention it?"

"No. He ain't said nothin' bout no Heaven."

"May I speak to him, please? He called me and left a message on my answering machine."

There was a pause.

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"Mrs. Washington?"

"He ain't here."

"Well, is there a good time to call him back? He was pretty intent on talking about it."

"He ain't gonna be back. He got busted last night."

"Oh..."

"They caught him sellin."

"Oh, I'm...I don't know what to say."

"Lance done what he had to do. Now I guess I will too."

"Well, I, I'm sorry I bothered you. Good-bye, ma'am."

"What was that ad about, anyhow?"

"Oh, I uh, I found a piece of Heaven lying by the side of the road about a week ago, and I'm just trying to find out who it belonged to. Your husband seemed to think it might be yours."

"Mine?"

"Well, yours and his, and your kid's...the family's."

"He did, huh?"

"Yes. Did you lose Heaven, Mrs. Washington?"

"Yeah, I reckon we did."

"Well maybe it *is* yours. Can you tell me what it looks like?"

"Oh, now, I don't know..."

"You have to try, Mrs. Washington. Otherwise how will I know?"

The woman was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, she spoke tentatively, as though she were unused to expressing abstract thought: "It's solid," she said, "good and solid. It feels like the earth, like roots and leaves and hard-packed dirt. If you set it in your lap, it makes music, like drums, like oh, hundreds of drums hidden behind the trees, and if you close your eyes it takes you away, it lifts you right out of your body and brings you to where the drums are, and there's dancing, and laughing, and the sound of bodies touching in the nighttime."

She fell silent.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. Oh yes, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Washington."

The others fared no better. She was cried to, cursed at, and begged, and

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when she was through she collapsed to the floor, the receiver resting loosely in her slackened fingers, and her chest burned with futility. She tried to cry, but there were no tears to be had. She was exhausted. The light was growing dim; the setting sun cast its red glow into her apartment.

She looked toward the closet, where the Heaven sat safely tucked into the shoebox. She was afraid to go to it.

Somewhere between the sun's immersion in the sea and the moon's rise to its zenith, where it hung like a cold stone, she drifted into sleep. When she awoke,the stars gazed in through her window, and the sea was painted over with the pale white color of bones. Someone was knocking at her door.

Sally pulled herself to her feet, grimacing at the aches that rioted in her joints, and padded to the door. She glanced at the digital clock next to the couch: 11:47.

"Who is it?"

"My name is Lucas."

"What do you want?"

"I'm here about the Heaven. Please. It's important."

Sally thought for a moment. She did not have a gun. She could not defend herself. She should just turn him away and go to bed.

But she found that she did not have the strength to turn away another person. Through telephone conversations she had denied Heaven to more people than she cared to count, dangling it over their ruined lives like a taunt, pulling it away when they began to hope. She felt poisoned. She could not do it again.

She unlatched the door and held it open. Lucas was an average man in every sense of the word: a little under six feet; light brown hair, brushed off to one side; an open, pleasant face. He wore a light brown sports jacket and tan slacks. He looked to be somewhere in his forties, but he wore his age comfortably, like a favorite hat. He held out his hand, and she took it.

"Thank you," he said. "I was afraid you'd turn me away. I know it's an odd time to come calling."

"How did you know where I live?"

"There aren't too many Sally Baxters in this part of town. Two, in fact, and the other one's an invalid."

"Oh."

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"May I see it?"

She went to the closet and withdrew the shoebox. It was almost hot in her hands. She gave it to him, and he removed the lid. The light sprang forth and bathed his face in a warm, white glow. It seemed to work a kind of magic on him: it filled in the lines on his face, softened the hard line of his mouth, darkened a gray streak in his hair.

He looked at her. "Oh, thank you," he said. "Thank you."

"That's all right. Take it."

"I'm afraid I don't have any money..."

"I don't want a reward. I'm just glad to be rid of it."

Lucas removed the Heaven from the shoebox and crooked it under his left arm. He let the shoebox drop to the floor. He looked at her, and smiled.

Sally was surprised as a great well of sorrow suddenly opened within her. Tears sprang to her eyes. "I just wanted to help people," she said. "I wanted to make them happy. Instead I only made things worse."

"I know," he said. "But at least you tried." He paused, and then said, "So why did you give it to me?"

She raised a hand helplessly, let it drop. "I don't want to be an arbiter anymore. I just want you to be happy. I should have given it to the first person who called, and had done with it." She closed her eyes. "I tried so *hard*."

"Too hard, maybe," said Lucas. "Maybe Heaven's a lot simpler than you're letting it be."

She looked at him.

He hugged it to his chest. "Anyway," he said, "I'm glad you gave it to me. I think I can iron out the wrinkles."

"I hope so."

"Good-bye, Sally. You are a good woman."

He went to the window and slid it open. A cool blast of ocean wind charged into the apartment and scampered about, upsetting papers, riffling through the leaves of paperback books. It carried on its back the scent of a great cold vastness, and with it a kind of magnificence. Lucas kicked away the screen, and it turned end over end in the darkness, falling to the ground hundreds of feet below. He climbed onto the ledge and leaped off, and the flapping end of his jacket transcended the boundary of itself and became instead two great wings, and he was flying, higher into the distance, a globe

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of light clutched tightly in his hands, and as he went more deeply into the night, and as she watched him from her window, the light grew smaller and smaller until it merged completely with the spinning lights of space, one more pinpoint of brilliance in a drifting sea of stars.

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Jerry Oltion lives in Eugene, Oregon, with his wife Kathy and their cat Ginger. Jerry writes mostly science fiction which often appears in Analog, *but occasionally we steal a story for* F&SF. *His novels include* Frame of Reference *(Warner/Questar) and two novels in the Isaac Asimov Robot City series.*

About "The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax," Jerry is astonishingly, frighteningly...silent.

The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax

By Jerry Oltion

"AT LEAST IF THEY RECOVER the film, they'll find out how we died." David Nelson struggled to keep his voice from quavering as he gripped the Jesus bar bolted to the instrument panel before him, and he tried not to look at the kilometer-high pyramid rushing toward the bridge of his nose.

Beside him in the scout plane, his companion, Muriel Mondou, seemed frozen in place, her right hand steady on the control stick, her left poised on the throttle. The instrument lights illuminated her form-fitting spacesuit with a soft glow that accentuated all her curves, and even now as she flew the plane into the yawning brink of disaster, David felt his hormones respond to the sight. He was not unique in that. The news media back on Earth ran her photos whenever they could, usually with captions like "Mon Dieu Muriel!" and they wrote articles describing her as "a broad interpretation of the term, 'space spectacular.'"

David, whose life depended more on her skills as an astronaut than on her measurements, was just glad she could fly.

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She had brought their airspeed down as slow as possible, but in Mars's thin atmosphere that wasn't very slow. "If they recover the film, we're dead anyway," she said without looking away from the windshield.

David didn't bother asking why they were taking pictures, then. He'd already argued that with her. Posterity, she'd said. They owed it to posterity to expose the fraud once it'd served its purpose.

The proximity alarm went off with a bone-tingling wail, and David slapped the quiet switch. His spacesuit wasn't nearly as form-fitting as hers, but after weeks of operating the navigation and science controls while wearing it, he hardly noticed the extra thickness of his gloves. "Two kilometers and closing," he said, but in the time it took him to say it, that distance had diminished by half.

Deimos and a sky full of stars provided the only light. Without amplifier goggles over their helmets they would have been flying nearly blind. Even with the goggles, the pyramid was just a gray triangle against a black sky. Its leading edge loomed like an assassin's knife, then slashed past only ten meters beyond their left wing.

David jabbed at the fire button for the port-side laser spectrometer, and a beam of intense blue light lanced out from the wingtip. Where it struck, the pyramid's rock face erupted in a line of lava.

An instant later they were clear. Muriel pulled the plane up and around in a crop-duster turn, then leveled out for another run. The building of the great pyramid of Cydonia had begun.

The pyramid had always been there, of course. Building one of the kilometer-high mountains that littered the Cydonia plain would have taken the entire Army Corps of Engineers a couple centuries. Muriel and David were the only two people on Mars, and they had struggled for over a week just to erect their living bubble, an inflated plastic dome covered with Martian soil for radiation shielding. What they were doing now was simply turning a natural feature into an alien artifact by drawing lines so it would look like something constructed.

This was the last week of a long and ultimately disappointing expedition. They'd been a year just in transit from Earth, a beefcake hunk of a man and a blonde goddess of a woman packed into a cylinder smaller than most studio apartments, driving each other crazy even though they'd been selected for

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compatibility just as much as for audience appeal or exploring ability. Arriving in Mars orbit and setting up their expedition base had broken the monotony, but the surveying flights had quickly become as dull as drifting in space. Their plane was even smaller than their spaceship, and it was almost all wing; after six weeks in the tiny cockpit, radar- and photo-mapping half the planet, they could count the rivets in their sleep.

And to top it off, they hadn't made any Earth-shaking discoveries. Oh, they'd learned all sorts of interesting things about the geological makeup of the surface, and uncovered plenty of evidence that the stream beds seen in satellite photos had indeed carried water millions of years ago, but they hadn't discovered anything useful in selling Mars to the tax-paying public, and that was the real catastrophe. As Al Shepard had once said about the Mercury program, "No bucks, no Buck Rogers." You had to have public support if you wanted money enough to fly; the near-death of the space program after the lunar landings had proved that. Muriel and David had provided as much inspiring footage as possible, both in flight and at home in their dome shelter, which they kept at about 75° so they could lounge around in front of the cameras with very little clothing, but the *planet* hadn't produced anything spectacular, and that was the problem. Unless they could come up with something about Mars that would inspire the masses back home, theirs would likely be the only mission there in the twenty-first century.

"There's always the Face," Muriel had said when the subject had first come up. Ever since a Viking photo had shown what looked to be a face staring up out of the Martian landscape, tabloid newspapers had been milking the story to death. They'd printed photos of the face and the mysterious pyramids surrounding it, photos retouched to make it look like the face was changing expression, speaking, even crying when the Pope died. The Martian Face was such a popular symbol that when NASA had announced its intention to send an expedition to Mars, the tabloid-reading public had naturally assumed the whole reason was to check out the face.

NASA had stubbornly scheduled the flyby for last, holding out for a legitimate scientific discovery, but time was running short. A few planners had secretly hoped the survey plane would malfunction before the end of the mission and the public would have to make do with more pictures from orbit, but for once the machinery had performed as designed. They would be able to do the flyby after all, and as the time drew nearer, more and more of their hopes rested on it.

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And fear that it, too, would be a bust began to weigh heavily on the crew. Nobody who knew anything about Mars seriously expected the face to amount to anything more than a chance arrangement of impact craters on a hillside, and the "pyramids" around it were almost certainly just mountains that had eroded with unusual symmetry. So when Muriel had said, "There's always the Face," David had responded with, "Oh sure. That ought to be good for about fifteen seconds of drama."

They'd already done their usual getting-ready-for-bed show with the lace nightie and the spandex bikini briefs, and had turned off the cameras for the night. They'd been enjoying their precious few moments of privacy by scratching and belching and trimming their nose hair like normal people, but Muriel had turned away from the mirror where she was flossing her teeth and said, "Maybe longer, if we do it right."

David had blown his nose, then said, "Oh? And what do you think we can do to make the Face more exciting than a mountain with old craters on it?"

"I don't know," she'd replied, beginning to pace the narrow confines of the dome. Ten steps took her from the glitzy chrome bathroom/kitchen on the north wall past the lab/dining table in the center of the room to the bed on the opposite side. "We'll have to see it up close first. But once we know what's actually there we could choose our approach angle to enhance the illusion, or maybe even use the exhaust from the emergency takeoff boosters to carve out the features a little better."

"With the cameras running all the time, documenting everything we do. Uh huh."

She'd paced back into the kitchen. "We can shut off the real-time cameras in the plane and just use the still cameras with our personal film reserve. Mission Control doesn't ever have to know we were there, but we'll have documentation if we need it."

"You don't think they'll notice when our signal suddenly stops?" he'd asked sarcastically.

"That's why we go at night." She'd walked back over to the bed, picked up his pile of discarded clothing, and tossed it to him. "Mission Control thinks we're about to hit the sack; we can rig the computer to keep sending fake heartbeat and respiration telemetry while we go check it out."

"Tonight?"

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"Tonight and tomorrow night are all we've got before we make the daytime flyby, and we may need both nights to do the touch-up work."

So off they'd gone, overjoyed to have slipped their reins for the first time since they'd begun training for the mission, but when they arrived after a three-hour flight they'd found the Face to be even less than they'd hoped for. If it had been built to resemble a human visage, then it had been intended to be seen only from orbit. Up close it was little more than an enormous sand dune with blowout hollows in the right places to suggest eyes and a mouth. In anything but oblique light, and from any view but directly overhead, it wouldn't look like anything at all. And it was far too big for Muriel and David to modify in any significant way, even with the fusion engine on their landing craft.

But the pyramids had looked promising. Straight-edged, flat-sided, all they lacked was some sign of an intelligent hand in their construction. As the two explorers circled the biggest of them, David had fired the laser spectrometer at the side of it, letting it vaporize some of the rock surface so he could read an emission spectrum from it and see what it was made of. Just ordinary Martian dirt, it turned out, but when they'd made another pass and saw the spidery line the laser had traced, Muriel had whooped with delight and said, "Hey, that's it! We can carve it into blocks!"

AFTER HALF a dozen passes, they backed off to study their handiwork. With the exception of a minor squiggle in one line from turbulence, the laser burns were arrow-straight and perfectly spaced.

"God, that looks great," David said. "They're just thin enough they won't show up from orbit, so it'll look perfectly legit when we take close-ups the day after tomorrow."

"I don't know, though," Muriel said. "They're fifty meters apart. Who's going to believe Martians could lift fifty-meter blocks into place?"

David laughed. "You're kidding, right? We're talking about the kind of people who thought the face was trying to speak."

"Ah. Good point."

"What worries me," said David, "is how we're going to cut the uprights. If we want it to look like blockwork, we have to cut vertical joints, too, and they're going to be a lot tougher. They have to connect with the horizontal

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lines, and if we overshoot by more than a few centimeters, it'll blow the whole effect."

"Hmm." Muriel banked around for another look. She studied the lines for a minute more, then said, "We could rig the uplink antenna motor to aim the forward laser, and program the pattern we want into the navigation computer. If I flew us straight toward the middle of the pyramid, it could draw the vertical lines for us."

David winced. "Straight at it? You know how close we'd have to get before the navcom could get a fix on the pattern?"

Muriel tipped the plane over in a slow barrel roll. "Hey, you forget who's flying this thing. We can do it."

David looked out at the pyramid doing its pirouette around them. Shaking his head, he said, "The things I do for the space program."

The next night came far too quickly. They arrived back at base from their first night just in time to take off for the next day's mapping flight over Xanthe, so they were pumping stimulants most of the day just to stay awake. On top of that, David had to spend most of his time in the cramped equipment bays in the wings to either side of the cabin, hooking the uplink motor to the spectrometer laser and patching the navigation computer into the system.

They landed at their base camp just before nightfall and made a show of getting ready early for bed, then as soon as they'd shut off the lights they jumped up and snuck out of the dome like teenagers heading to a party. Muriel flew at top speed toward Cydonia while David recalled the photos of the lines they'd drawn the night before and fed them into the navcom's pattern recognition buffer.

"All right," Muriel said when the first triangular peak slid up over the horizon. "Lock onto the west side of number one; we might as well make our first run count."

"Ready here," David replied.

Muriel slowed the plane to just above stall speed — still almost the speed of sound — and lined it up so they were flying directly toward the pyramid. They watched it grow larger and larger, waiting nervously for the navcom to recognize it and lock on.

"Come on," David pleaded. "Find the son of a bitch!"

The wall eclipsed nearly half the sky before Muriel banked hard to the

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left and pulled back on the stick, shoving the throttles forward at the same time to keep them from stalling out. The pyramid slid past only meters below.

"Why didn't it lock on?" she asked.

David was still staring straight ahead. "Because there weren't any lines there for it to lock onto," he replied softly.

"What? There had to be. We marked every side of every damned pyramid in Cydonia last night."

He looked over at her. "Well we must have missed this one, because I guarantee you, I'd have seen a paper cut if there'd been one."

Muriel looped and banked the plane through an Immelmann turn, taking them back alongside the face they'd nearly smacked into. Sure enough, it was smooth as a stretch of beach at low tide.

She banked the plane tight around the edge, but the next face was just as smooth. Once more with the same result, then she continued around until she was aimed at the next pyramid.

It, too, was smooth.

"I *know* we etched this one," she said. "I remember that little crater down there at the base of it."

"Yeah?" David asked. "Then what happened to the lines? Did little Martians come out and patch them up today?"

"Maybe," she said. "Do me a favor and aim the penetration radar at it when I swing us around."

"What, you think it's *hollow*?"

"I don't know what it is, but something funny's going on, and that's one thing we can check pretty easily."

"True enough," said David. He turned on the radar unit, and while he set it for maximum penetration he said, "We should have thought of doing this last night."

She laughed. "Are you kidding? We were so intent on setting up a big find, we forgot to look for a real one."

David laughed with her. "God, who'd have believed it? The tabloid writers were right. This *is* where all the action's at on Mars."

"Maybe. Get ready, we're coming up on it."

The plane swept past a few hundred meters from the pyramid, but David didn't look up from the radar screen. Sure enough, the cone-shaped image was

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darkest at the edges, and nearly transparent in the middle.

"Jesus, it's only a few meters thick," he said. "There's no way that thing's built out of rock. It's got to be something else, with a layer of rock and dirt over the top."

"Just like our dome," Muriel said. She banked the plane and began circling.

David looked out at the sharp triangles against the night sky. "What, like a radiation shield?" he asked. "Why would Martians need a radiation shield? They evolved here, didn't they?"

Muriel shrugged. "There used to be water here, and more atmosphere. Maybe they evolved under that, and when it got thinner they had to go underground."

"Jesus," David said again. "Why did we have to find this *now*? We've only got two more days before our launch window!"

"Hey, look at the bright side," Muriel said. "All we've got to do tomorrow is shoot one radar image like that one and we'll be coming back for sure."

David shook his head. "*Somebody* will, but it won't be us."

"Why not?"

"Did Armstrong and Aldrin ever go back to the moon? Hell no. Once they got home they were national heroes; NASA wasn't about to risk them on another flight. They even tried to take away their jet privileges."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I was. Trust me; we may have made the find, but we'll be watching on TV along with the rest of the great unwashed when the first people walk inside it."

Muriel banked the plane lazily left, then right. "Not if we beat them to the punch," she said. "I bet that little crater I saw is actually the doorway."

David looked at it as they flew past again. "Why would there be just one?" he asked. "If it's a door, wouldn't every pyramid have one?"

"Maybe they're all connected underground," Muriel said. "Maybe the Martians don't go out much anymore. Or maybe they don't go out at all, and that's there just for us."

David looked over at her, but it was impossible to read expressions in the darkness. He said sarcastically, "And I suppose the Face really was made to draw us here after all."

"Could be. We won't know unless we investigate closer."

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He laughed a high-pitched, nervous laugh. "Mission Control would never let us go inside, not on our last day."

"What if we don't ask? We're here right now; I say let's land and check it out."

"In the *dark*?"

"Sure. We've got the emergency retros. I can skid this thing to a stop in less than half a klick. The sand is flat all around the base of the pyramids; it'll be a piece of cake."

David looked down at the radar screen. The image confirmed Muriel's statement; there was plenty of flat ground down there. No sign of life, but....

"Do you think it's smart to just waltz in there? I mean, we were firing lasers at them last night."

Muriel was already banking for her approach. "They haven't fired back yet. Besides, this'll give us a chance to apologize before we leave."

"Oh sure, like they're going to understand anything we say."

"Who knows? They could have been listening to our radio and TV broadcasts for years."

"Now that's a scary thought."

Muriel laughed. "That's what I love about you; you're so positive." Before he could reply, she said, "Hang on, this could get bumpy," and she lowered the nose of the plane.

She brought them in near the base of the pyramid with the crater at the bottom of it. The wall was a flat mountainside to their left, and the ground rushed past only a few meters below as she killed velocity by tilting the plane higher and higher toward a stall. At the last moment, just as the warning buzzer sounded, she leveled it out again and lit the retro rockets, which braked the plane to a near-stop in the air. It fell like a rock the last couple of meters, bounced and slid a little ways on the sand, then came to rest less than a hundred meters from the crater.

Muriel let out the breath she'd been holding. Turning to David, she said, "Well, let's go see if the natives are friendly."

Muriel had been right; the doorway was obvious enough once they hiked to the edge of the crater and looked inside. The pit hadn't been formed by meteoric impact; it was merely a depression carved like a strip mine next to the pyramid. A depression whose angled sides matched the pyramid's slant

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perfectly, and from the bottom of which a tunnel led underneath the wall.

"Why the basement access?" David wondered aloud, shining his helmet spotlight around as he took it all in.

"Maybe the Martians are built like beavers and this was a pond before the planet dried up."

"Hah. Right. More likely it's a trap; we get to the middle of it and the bottom falls out or something." All the same, he walked down the crater's steep slope, carrying the suitcase-sized portable EVA kit in his left hand. It held sample containers, air and soil test equipment, spare power packs for the pressure suits, and an emergency radio transmitter that would be useless under all that dirt. David snorted at the thought of using it anyway. Who would they call? They were going to have to rely on their own resources here; nobody at mission control could help them now.

Muriel was right beside him, her form-fit spacesuit making her look almost unclothed in the dim starlight and the reflected glow of their helmet beams.

"I hope Martians have the same standards of beauty we do," David murmured.

"I hope they don't," Muriel said. "I've already got half of Earth ogling my body; I don't need a planet full of Martians staring at me too."

"They're staring at us anyway," David said. "I can feel it."

"Hah. They've probably been dead for millennia." Muriel stepped out ahead of him, but at the mouth of the tunnel she leaped back in surprise, nearly crashing into him.

A meter or so in front of her, a spider the size of an outstretched hand stood motionless on the ground.

David backed up a pace. "Whoa, what the heck is that?"

"I don't know," Muriel said, "but whatever it is, we're outnumbered. Look." She tilted her head back to illuminate the side of the pyramid, which was littered with them.

None of the spiders moved, so after a minute they bent down to examine the one by their feet. Its resemblance to a spider was only superficial; it had four legs instead of eight, and its hollow body held a tiny mound of dirt that made it look more like a toy dump truck than an arachnid. In front of the hopper was a flat plate a few centimeters on a side that looked for all the world like a solar collector.

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Sure enough, under the glare of their spotlights, the creature began to move. One leg at a time, it crept forward with its minuscule load of soil.

"Hah!" Muriel said, straightening up. "I bet they're repair robots. Solar powered and slow as hell, but they're probably fast enough to keep ahead of weathering. All they have to do is haul a teaspoonful of dirt at a time up the side of the mountain for the rest of eternity, and the pyramid's radiation shield will stay good as new."

"Or maybe they're the local equivalent of scorpions," David said.

Muriel snorted. "I don't see anything they could bite or sting with." She stepped over it contemptuously and continued on into the tunnel, David following nervously behind.

The roof was smooth as poured concrete, and way out of reach overhead. The tunnel was wide enough for both of them to walk abreast to the far end, which sloped upward again after a few dozen steps and terminated at a closed door. An L-shaped handle stuck out from about head high.

"I don't see a doorbell," Muriel said. "Think we should knock?"

"If aliens came to my place in the middle of the night, I think I'd appreciate it," David said. "Give me time to get into my underwear, at least."

"Right. The great American phobia: getting caught by aliens without your underwear." Muriel reached up and banged her space-suited hand flat against the door a few times.

While they waited for something to respond, she said, "So do we go with the traditional 'We come in peace,' or do we make something up?" Despite her nonchalant attitude, her voice was fast and nearly breathless.

David wasn't doing much better. His laugh sounded forced and his voice cracked when he said, "How about the even more traditional 'Take me to your leader?'"

"Sounds good. You want to say it or should I?"

"How 'bout we say it together. In a monotone of course."

"Right. As soon as the door opens."

But after five more minutes and another couple rounds of knocking, it became apparent that they weren't going to be greeted at the door.

"Okay," David said as he reached for the handle. "Plan B." It took both of them tugging on the lever before it would budge, but when they pulled it downward they felt a latch click and they were able to pull the door outward.

As in a refrigerator, a light came on inside when the door cleared the

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jamb. It could have *been* a refrigerator light for all the illumination it provided, but it was enough to let them see what lay beyond the door: another five meters or so of smooth-sided tunnel and another door.

"Hah, an airlock." David hauled the EVA kit inside and the two of them pulled the door closed behind them. The pressure in the lock began to rise almost immediately.

David opened the EVA kit and switched on the spectrometer. He read off the list of gasses as they appeared on its screen. "Nitrogen, methane, ethane, propane, hydrogen cyanide — What the hell is this? Mars never had hydrocarbons in its atmosphere. And where's the carbon dioxide?"

"My ears just popped," Muriel said. "The pressure must be higher than ours, too."

"One and a half times Earth normal. That's crazy. Mars couldn't hold that kind of pressure for a day. It'd all blow off into space."

Their spacesuits had gone from being shaped balloons around their bodies to being tight, wrinkled, constricting clothing. Only the rigid helmets retained their original shape.

"I hope these things hold against pressure from the other side," David said. "There's enough cyanide out there to knock us flat in no time."

"Let's make this a short visit, then," Muriel said. She went to the other door and repeated her knocking.

Nobody answered her that time, either, so they pulled open the inner door as well. Beyond it they found a dimly lit locker room, obviously a suiting-up area. Thick orange dust covered the floor and the benches — which were high enough to be tables for a human.

"Doesn't look like anybody's been here for a while," Muriel said. "Like maybe a couple thousand years."

In the larger chamber, they could see a distinct orange haze to the air as well. "This isn't right," David insisted. "This is more like Jupiter's air, or Saturn's."

Muriel shook her head. "No, they're mostly hydrogen. It's more like one of their big moons."

"It's cold enough to be." He looked at his suit thermometer. "Uh-oh. It's over a hundred below in here. Our heaters aren't going to be able to keep up with that, not with this much air to suck the heat away."

"Let's grab what we can, then, and get out of here." Muriel opened one

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of the lockers. It was nearly twice her height, and so was the spacesuit it contained. She and David pulled it out and dragged it into the airlock.

"Tripod legs," she pointed out immediately. "Four arms. And it's tall and thin as a light pole."

"That fits, at least," David said. "Mars's gravity is low enough to make tall an option."

"So's just about every Jovian and Saturnian moon."

They made another run, grabbing an armful each of what little portable equipment they could find, then they slammed the airlock door behind them, their fingers and toes already numb with cold, and waited impatiently for the cyanide-laced air to bleed away. When their pressure suits had ballooned back to normal, they opened the outer door and carried their treasures to the plane. Muriel went back for the spider and stowed it in a heavy metal sample canister, just in case it decided to wake up again in flight.

Inside the plane, David called up the astronomy database on their reference screen. It only took a minute to find a perfect match for atmospheric composition. "Titan," he said. "These guys were from Saturn's moon, Titan."

Muriel strapped herself in and started the engines. "Then this was their outpost when they explored Mars." She looked over at the pyramid. "God, I'd love to come back with the right kind of equipment and go deeper inside there."

"Dream on," David said. "I'll bet you Mission Control won't even let us come back tomorrow. They won't want to risk losing us in there, not now that we've already got a few artifacts. And when the public catches wind of this, there won't be a nickel for another Mars expedition."

Muriel paused with her hand on the throttle. "Huh? Why not? This place could be a gold mine. Think what we can learn about the beings who built it."

David sighed. "You're thinking like a scientist again. Try thinking like the average voter. We've discovered evidence of life on Titan; where do you think the next space shot is going to go?"

"Even with these pyramids just sitting here waiting for us?"

"Even so. Planetary missions are expensive; people are going to spend their money on the ones with the shiny new package."

Muriel powered up the engines, and the plane began to slide across the sand. As it lifted into the air, David said, "Forget coming back here; from this

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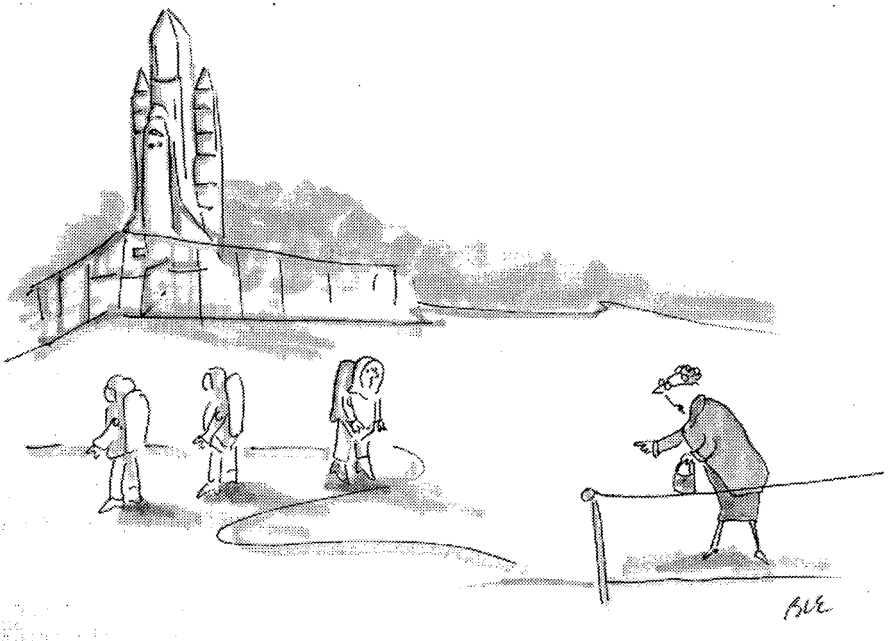
moment on, Mars is a dead issue."

At the base of the pyramid, two thin, leathery Martians peered out of the tunnel at the departing airplane. One of them turned a talking stalk toward the other one and blinked its biolight in speech. "I think they fell for it," it said.

The other one blinked back: "Good. I was beginning to worry that the Face wouldn't draw them here after all."

The first Martian blinked in staccato laughter. "No, humans will always succumb to curiosity. Now if the Titans are ready with their fake Pluto outpost by the time the Earthlings get there, I bet we can keep them from bothering either of us for another century at least."



"Call when you get there!"

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

HUMANITY AS CANCER

"...still I have not seen the fabulous city on the Pacific shore. Perhaps I never will. There's something in the prospect southwest from Barstow which makes one hesitate. Although recently, driving my own truck, I did succeed in penetrating as far as San Bernardino. But was hurled back by what appeared to be clouds of mustard gas rolling in from the west on a very broad front. Thus failed again. It may be however that Los Angeles will come to me. Will come to all of us, as it must (they say) to all men."

Edward Abbey
Desert Solitaire

IN 1960 the journal *Science* published a short paper which is still sending slow-motion shock waves through the soothsayers of our time. Titled "Doomsday: Friday, 13 November, A.D. 2026," its abstract reads in full, "At this date human population will approach infinity if it grows as it has grown in the last two millennia."

Period. Its authors, Heinz van Foerster, Patricia Mora and Lawrence Amiot, were members of the staff of the department of electrical engineering at the University of Illinois, Urbana. They were not population experts, but they noted a simple oddity of mathematics. The rise in human numbers was always studied in "doubling times," the measure of how quickly population doubled. But real human numbers don't follow so clean an equation.

For a species expanding with no natural limitation aside from ordinary deaths, the rate of increase of population is proportional to the population itself. Mathematically, the population N is described by an equation in which the change in N,

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dN, over a change in time t, dt, obeys

$$dN/dt = b\,N$$

with b usually assumed to be a constant. If b is truly constant, then N will rise exponentially.

Fair enough. But if people are clever, the proportionality factor b itself will weakly increase as we learn to survive better. This means the rate of increase will rise with the population, so N increases faster than an exponential.

In fact, it can run away to infinity in a finite time. The equation describing this is a bit more complicated. To find how b changed with N, the authors simply looked at the average increase over the last two thousand years, to iron out bumps and dips, seeking the long-term behavior.

They found a chilling result. Our recent climb in N in the last few centuries is not an anomaly; instead, it fits the smooth curve of human numbers. Tracking the solution backward "post-dicts" that we were a mere 200,000 people a million years ago. Of course such great spans aren't well fit by population counts gathered from two millennia, and the equation becomes silly. But it should be good for at least a few centuries more.

Looking into the near future, it predicts a chilling result: a singularity, with N rising faster and faster, going beyond view on Nov. 13, 2026. "The clever population annihilates itself," they remark laconically. "Our great-great-grandchildren will not starve to death. They will be squeezed to death."

The paper has never been refuted. Further checks on the growth of the factor b have pushed the singularity date further away, to about 2042. This is comforting, moving the date by about twenty years in the thirty-four years since the paper appeared.

But the general conclusion stands. As an exercise in statistics it is stimulating, and as far as I know the authors did little with it after their first telling point.

Of course, nothing grows to the sky. Something will happen before b gets too large; the four horsemen of the apocalypse will ride again. Perhaps they already are. Still, we are not doormats. We are attempting population control, but results are slow, and pressures are mounting.

I wrote before in this column about the ideas which follow, in a piece titled "The Biological Century." I'd like to revisit an idea I floated there, with some second thoughts.

The future is coming, and it's ugly.

Or so many believe. From staid

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university presidents and scruffy environmentalists alike, a growing consensus holds that humanity has entered a watershed era, a time of vast disasters looming large, just over the horizon of this generation. Their case rests on far more than an equation, too.

In 1992 I went on a cross-country hike in Orange County to protest a highway soon to go in. Puffing up a hill, I struck up a conversation with a member of the eco-warrior group Earth First, who wore the signature red shirt with a clenched fist. We mounted a ridge and saw the gray sweep of concrete that lapped against the hills below.

"Looks like a sea of shit," the Earth Firster said. "Or a disease."

That same month the National Academy of Sciences and Britain's Royal Society jointly warned of the dangerous links between population and environmental damage. Following this up, the Union of Concerned Scientists mustered 1500 experts to sign a "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" and published it in leading newspapers. Heavy hitters, these, including the predictable (Linus Pauling, Paul Ehrlich, Carl Sagan), the inexpert but sanctified (Desmond Tutu), but also the heads of many scientific societies, Nobel Laureates, and authorities of many fields. One such Laureate, Henry Kendall of M.I.T., is leading the New Cassandras in a campaign to rouse the intelligentsia.

His case is easy to make. World population grows by 90 million yearly and will double within half a century, maybe less. More people have been born in the last forty years than in the previous three *million* years. About 8 percent of all human beings ever born live today. We are gaining at about 1.7 percent a year.

Meanwhile, the Green Revolution is apparently over: world per-capita crops have declined. About ten percent of the Earth's agricultural land area has been damaged by humans. Water may be the first major resource to go; half of all nations now have water shortages. Even in the American midwest and southwest, farmers are sucking "fossil water" laid down in the ice ages, pulling it from aquifers which will deplete within a generation.

But such policy-wonk numbers, the ecologists remind us, are too human-centered. Our swelling numbers have their greatest impact on defenseless species in rain forests, savannahs and coral reefs. Biologist E.O. Wilson of Harvard warns that we could lose thirty percent of all species within half a century, and that might be only the beginning.

Humans exert selective pressures

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on the biological world. North Atlantic waters show a clear pattern of over-fishing, and ever-shrewd nature has filled these new niches with "trash fish" like skates and spiny dogfish which we cannot eat and thus do not take out.

Monoculture crops worldwide gain efficiency by growing the same staple — wheat, rice, corn, trees — over a large area, but this is inherently more fragile. Diseases and predators prey easily and already erosion is a major threat in many such areas.

Environmental damage grows not merely because our numbers rise, but because our expectations do, too. The masses jammed into Buenos Aires want a better life — which means more consumer goods. The chain between such ambitions and the clearing of distant forests is, though long, quite clear.

Most environmentalists are technophobic, reluctant to admit that the greatest enemy of the rain forests is not Dow Chemical but rather sunburned, ambitious men newly armed with chain saws, eager to better their lot in life.

Still, hand-wringing is not new and skepticism about it is well earned. Paul Ehrlich's alarmist "The Population Bomb" has yet to explode, twenty-five years after publication, though some demographers feel that Ehrlich may simply be a few decades off.

And there are counter-trends. Many are laboring to see that the factor b does not increase.

The "developing world" — to use the latest evasive tag attempting to cover societies as diverse as Singapore and Somalia — is the great engine of population growth, but its pattern is not an exponential runaway. Taken all together, the poorer nations' growth rates seem to have reached a plateau.

This may echo the industrial world, whose net growth curve broadly peaked around 1900 at a rate of about one percent a year, and is now a fourth of that. The poor countries may have entered just such a transition era. Some nations began peaking in the 1970s and others join them. Still, the plateau average rate is 2.5 percent per year, so they have a long way to fall.

Will they decline? Environmentalists and professors alike fear they won't.

Our numbers respond to both feedback loops and to feed-forward anticipations. Gloom, doom — well known intellectual commodities, finding a perpetual market. The 1960 paper is still the firmest basis for hand-wringing. Few experts believe the planet can sustain a population

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doubling in parallel with rising economic desires. This is how the Earth Firsters merge with the academics — a profoundly pessimistic view of our collective future, shared from the hushed halls of Harvard to the jerky hip-hop images of MTV.

This sea change we already see in severe cultural collision, such as immigration. MIT's Kendall predicts a doubling of Mexico's immigration into the USA within a decade. Shantytowns along the USA southwestern border recall the slums of Rio. Last year the USA added 970,000 new legal immigrants, plus 132,000 refugees and the INS estimates that slightly over a million illegal immigrants came to stay. Our growth rate is nearly at one percent per year. Since our native population is near the Zero Population Growth level so publicized in the 1970s, this means immigration is virtually the sole cause of US growth, and places us far ahead of other industrial nations.

Immigration-driven cultural strife is growing both here and in Europe. Anti-immigration forces typically fix myopically upon their local rise, Kendall says, but the only true solution must be global. "Until masses of people stop wanting to emigrate, you still have a basic problem." He is careful to shy away from the immigration issue, pitching his cool Cassandra tone to a lofty moral plane. His arguments seem far from the fever-eyed cries of the eco-warriors.

But Garrett Hardin, emeritus professor from UC Santa Barbara and Kendall ally, argues for an America-saving cut in immigration. Target: eventually, less than 200 million Americans, since this is the sustainable level. "Sustainable" is the consensus watchword, including some unsettling ideas.

To me the most significant one is Hardin's opposition to sending food aid to overpopulated areas such as Somalia. "Every time we send food to save lives in the present, we are destroying lives in the future." He invokes a cycle now well known — aid fuels birth rates, then leads to famine within a generation. Human "die-backs" are now a routine feature of worldwide news, with "compassion fatigue" already evident in the media.

Robert Malthus, the original population prophet, thought that civilization would hit the wall in the late nineteenth century. Economists like Julian Simon of the University of Maryland dismiss the doomsayers, noting that they've been around since the Bible. "The only difference is that Ezekiel and Jeremiah were much better writers."

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Simon and others marshal powerful counter-arguments, though they are seldom heard among the intelligensia. They remind us that mass human starvation in the modern world results mainly from outmoded political systems or war or both. Somalia is not overpopulated, as Hardin claims — it is the victim of obsolete African clan patriarchies trying to run bigger groups than their systems ever envisioned. In this view, starvation arises from human stupidity, most of it political stupidity. Only education, particularly science education, can help that. As for war, the major preventative is democracy — there hasn't been a war between democracies for more than a century. Democratization of the world proceeds apace, driven by UN sanctions and TV advertising alike.

They feel we have a long way to go before we hit the Malthus wall. Water might prove to be the limiting factor. Flying over the Western U.S., it's almost entirely empty, as are a lot of other places on the planet with good climate.

That changes if you have power for desalination. For the $100 billion we've spent on the drug war, plus $10 billion a year we continue to spend, we could have gone a long way toward working fusion. Or we could have developed thorium breeder fission, and maybe less exotic, cheap solar cells, if fusion turned out to have unexpected difficulties. For a small fraction of our defense budget we could still do something radical in the way of power generation, before the Ogalala aquifer runs dry in a generation or two and the bread basket becomes a dust bowl.

Uplifting the bulk of humanity can suppress population growth, if well managed. It can either top out at comfortable levels, or "everywhere is Los Angeles" levels, as in the Edward Abbey quotation I opened with. It's our choice. Refusing the third world food helps not at all, and even hurts (they grow slowly anyway from information trickle). Giving them food without technology doesn't help either, and may even be worse.

Changing social attitudes is slow work. Much of the Catholic third world is stuck in a high growth pattern. The major problem is not religion, though. Anglo Catholics in the USA have the same fecundity as Protestants and there is no reason to think this would not also eventually turn true South of the border. Industrialization and mechanized farming are the key ideas, since children are an economic asset rather than a liability only in low tech agrarian economies. Luddites can't solve the population problem.

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So solutions are available, if we wise up. But voices saying this are seldom heard. Simon and his allies are in a tiny minority. The overwhelming majority of thinkers, whether economists or biologists, see disaster ahead. That 1960 paper casts a long shadow.

I suspect there is more here than a Malthusian malaise. While there are ever more mouths, there is also possible global damage unimagined by Malthus, a far more muscular feedback effect. These could tilt the entire biosphere against many species, including us. A biologist recently remarked to me, "We've just run out of new niches. So the whole system will do a little feedback stabilizing." The vast, numbing menu of looming potential disasters — lessening fish stocks, water, topsoil; dwindling rain forests; growing ozone holes; dying species; global warming; deepening poverty; spreading pollution — makes the New Cassandras different.

They bring a message already deeply enshrined in the hardcore environmentalist movement, one the media have preached for decades. The issue is not the dry debate between the Simons and the Kendalls, but the sea change in moral attitudes that underlies the talk, whether it is over immigration or owls-versus-jobs.

To see the future, look to the fringes. The environmentalists are a powerful lobby, but they also have a wing which will, if you get in their way, spike your tree, slip sand into your backhoe's gas tank, or sink your tuna boat.

Initially their rules — as laid down by crusty Edward Abbey in the novel which inspired Earth First, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* — were two. First, honor all life and do not hurt anyone. But Earth Firsters have strayed far from this rule, preparing traps for desert bikers and loggers which could have killed — but didn't because of the vigilance of their opponents, not themselves.

Neither have they met their second rule: Don't get caught. Many are willing to break the law and pay the price. The Arizona Five, who tried to cut an electrical tower, got nabbed by an FBI undercover agent.

Do the crime, do the time — a principled stance, but how far can it go? Are there crimes we cannot accept?

There are hundreds of monkey-wrenchers in lesser camps such as the Animal Liberation Front, the Hunt Saboteurs who disrupt big-game sport, Albion Nation, and assorted Deep Ecologists.

These are not policy people with whom libertarians can reach gentle-

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manly agreement about, say, junking federal timber subsidies. They all practice varying degrees of "ecotage" which estimates place at about $25 million a year in the US. I have met eco-warriors who are completely unaffiliated, though, some quite well educated and no less determined.

Back on that Orange County ridgeline, gazing out over miles of dusky, besmogged concrete, the Earth Firster said something that genuinely frightened me. Not because it was a specific threat, but because it connected with my own academic world.

"Y'know, we're a cancer. And somebody's going to find a cure."

Already we are numbed by TV images of diebacks — the sudden, catastrophic collapse of whole life support structures on a regional level; the Four Horsemen writ large. I believe, though, that two social forces will bring even more dire events in the next century.

Consider: our globe has a technological North with many accomplished bioengineers. Given our desire to extend our own lifespans, much research will go into an intricate fathoming of the human immune system, to fixing our cardiovascular plumbing, to forestall aging and the like. That is the first important and plausible point.

On the other hand, the North will increasingly be appalled with the South's runaway growth. Many poor nations will double in numbers within thirty years.

Think of watching it on high-definition TV. Megacities will sprawl, teeming with seedy, corrupt masses. Sao Paulo at 34 million, second only to pristine Tokyo. Lagos, Nigeria, which nobody ever considers, may top 17 million, despite the multitudes lost to AIDS. Kindergarten-age children digging through cow dung, looking for corn kernels the cows hadn't digested. Colorful chaos laced with dusky despair. Gangs of urchin thieves who don't know their own last names. Gutters as sewers. Families living in cardboard boxes. Babies found discarded in trash heaps.

Torrents of illegal immigration will pour over borders. Responding to deprivation, crazed politico/religious movements will froth and foment, few of them appetizing as seen from a Northern distance.

The more the North thinks of humanity as a malignancy, the more we will unconsciously long for disasters. This is the second, all-too-plausible point.

Somewhere, sometime, someone may see in these two points a massive, historically unique problem and a quite simple solution: the Designer Plague.

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An airborne form of, say, a super-influenza. The Flu From Hell, carried on a cough, with a several-week incubation period, so the plague path will be hard to follow. Maybe fine-tuned, too, carrying a specific trait that confines it to tropical climes, like malaria.

We in the comfy North forget that for the bulk of humanity, diseases are kept at bay by a thin modernity in medicine, well water and clean food. Yet across this globe a swift viral traffic flows. Influenza A, which brings teary, aching fever to a hundred million of us yearly, is an old enemy, endlessly vigorous. It would make a handy weapon.

Viruses are ancient oddities. We have now mapped the RNA core of Influenza A and its surface proteins — tiny spikes that prod the human immune system into forming cloaking antibodies. This virus can mutate, rearranging the molecular code that shapes the spike-tip proteins. Then the new virus can dodge around our bodies' immune response, feasting on us until our blood streams conjure up a fresh antibody defense.

There is a curiosity in modern immunology, though. Antibody records of elderly patients' blood show that since 1890 all influenza epidemics have been wrought by only a few of the possible subtypes of the virus particles. Minor changes have kept the damage minimal.

Nobody knows why this is so. Influenza resides in our domesticated friends — turkeys, pigs, fish, chickens. We have tracked flus that breed in both birds and pigs, and new strains that attack humans have come from both; the Ford administration's alarm over Swine Flu was not hysterical.

It spreads by air not through Boeing, but through ducks and sea gulls. Only the pandemic of 1918-19, mis-named "Spanish" though it came from southern China, was powerful, killing as many of us as any single war has ever done.

Influenza's potency derives from its primitive nature. Its viral RNA lacks the proofreading and editing skills which longer, more stable genomes such as ours have developed. So it is easily manipulated, and luckily the changes have been mild of late. Somehow, in the breeding ponds of Asia where farmers tend their paddy rice, only minor variants have appeared.

But in the laboratory, drastic tailoring is easier than ever before — and will get easier still. Big shifts in the influenza pattern, a new mix of genes, could bring greater infectivity and startlingly high virulence. Already, one carrier on an airplane, or (in army experiments) one sick per-

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son just walking through a tent can infect many. The big advances could lie in virulence. There are newly "emergent" viruses like Ebola that can kill up to two out of every three victims, suggesting that influenza could be brought up to this level as well.

A mass plague does not necessarily demand high tech, either. Making a custom flu strain is very difficult now (unless tinkering turns one up by accident), because we do not know yet what makes strains virulent. Instead, our old enemy smallpox could fill in. Since it was eradicated in the mid-1970's, few people have been vaccinated. By now most of the world is susceptible again. Smallpox is kept locked away in two heavily guarded sites in the world, and the medical community continues to debate whether those two samples should be destroyed. (One counter-argument holds that, after all, smallpox is a species, and we should conserve species. I am not making this up.)

But smallpox is imprisoned only in one sense. Its genome is published in the open literature, though, so in another sense it's everywhere. Like all life, smallpox is at root *information*. A biological virus in this sense is exactly like a computer virus. All smallpox needs to make its way out of virtual reality is for a savvy scientist to translate.

I asked a friend to imagine how he would do this. With barely a moment's hesitation he rattled off, "Well, first you turn on a standard gene synthesizer. You use the published genome sequences to run some fragments of its DNA genome out. Keep it in manageable fragments, so you can then splice them. You put the naked genome into a cell which has been infected by a related pox virus, see? That supplies the needed viral enzymes. After that you get complete viruses, which you can amplify in cell culture. Dead easy. Then you're off — just spread it around. Hozzat for scary?"

With modified proteins, airborne particles can turn ten or even a hundred times more deadly. And in the next few decades, myriad biotech workers will know how to alter viral information.

How many will belong to the Animal Liberation Front? It won't take many. Friends of mine who work on disease control estimate that with a bit of luck a new strain of influenza could be developed by a single researcher, using a room of equipment. And there are such isolated specialists: in the 1950s the Soviets experimented with the Spanish Flu and it got out, killing thousands — a fact

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they successfully suppressed for decades.

How many would it take to spread such a designer plague? Dozens would suffice.

Think of their rationalizations. Humanity as cancer. The Deep Ecology Credo: all life is equally sacred.

Look at the big picture. Why not save millions of species a year by trimming the numbers of a mere single species?

And consider simple human misery. The aftermath of the Black Plague was a burst of prosperity, as the living inherited the wealth of the dead. Suddenly there were more croplands per person, more homes and horses and even hats. Enough, an Earth Firster gone wrong might argue, to get the battered South back on its economic feet. A blessing, really.

And they would do their time for doing the crime, to be sure. The essential point here is that theirs would be a *moral* argument proceeding from a wildly different premise: all life is equal.

Would anyone be mad enough to kill billions, hoping to stave off the ecological and cultural collapse of nations, of continents, of whole societies? It seems despicable, mad — and quite plausible, to me. Speculations along these lines have already been voiced by molecular biologists.

Such dark possibilities come with any major advance in human capabilities. Only by anticipating them, as H.G. Wells foresaw atomic war, can we do the thinking and imagining that might prevent them.

Containing such threats only superficially resembles the nuclear proliferation problem. The first response to such a threat will probably be more state policing. But plutonium is scarce, so the plutonium pipeline is easily policed. The flu is everywhere, and so are genetic laboratories. There will never be enough cops.

Outside regulation will be nearly helpless. The very power of medical biotechnology lies in its ease of self-reproduction. A small conspiracy could develop Influenza A into a new, virulent form, test it on animal populations, and then spread it with already immunized carriers.

For immunization would go hand in hand with the very bioengineering that made SuperFlu. If one knows the map, one can chart a path through the obstacles. It is technically simple to develop a vaccine alongside the SuperFlu, and even design it so that the carriers could be safe from the effects.

Further shrewd games suggest themselves. With a vaccine in hand, the North could speedily immunize

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its population. Still, medical resources would be strained even in the North, the public outcry deafening. Inoculating in the South would be far more difficult, from slow transport, inevitable corruption and the sheer numbers of the afflicted.

So even if the plotters were caught early on in the spreading of the designer plague, the North would face a vexing moral chasm. Exert themselves to save many in the South, or be sure all their own populations were safe first?

And other, quieter voices would say, wait a minute. Sure, the fanatics were wrong, evil — but if this disease runs its course, it *will* solve a lot of problems...

Standard bureaucratic regulation cannot contain this potential, quite original evil. The probable sources are small and diffused.

What could stop the SuperFlu? At a minimum, we should deplore the superheated rhetoric of humanity-as-cancer. Behind such headline-grabbing oversimplifications lurk some obnoxious assumptions and poor reasoning.

Far more effectively, we can reaffirm basic humanist values. Not all life is equivalent. While other species of course have an essential place, we cannot evade the fact that we are now the stewards of their world.

This means that the figures likely to resort to mass murder through biotechnology must be reached. Modern America stresses narrowly trained specialists, not broad education. We should fear the politicized experts. If they remain outsiders, their demands ignored, they will become steadily more dangerous.

There is a further constellation of arguments which might reach the ecowarriors, given time. Experience shows that populations stabilize when technology, women's education, and childhood life expectancy rise above a critical level. But on the way to this point lies a disaster zone: technology improves life expectancy and fuels a population boom, which then exacts a terrible toll from the environment.

To get the third world through the danger zone demands that they *not* follow our path to industrialization. Going through the "gray" technology of the nineteenth century would indeed yield mass pollution and gobble up resources. What the developing world needs is not giant dams, but cheap solar power collectors. Not steelworks, but composite material assembly sheds, weaving renewable organic resources into hard, light products. They need our future, not our past.

Lewis Thomas points out that

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it's this way in medicine. Low tech medicine is cheap — people get polio (say) or Salmonella, and die. Medium tech is nasty and expensive — iron lungs and keeping people alive when there is no good treatment for a disease is costly. Really high tech medicine, vaccine and antibiotics, is relatively cheap again, and everyone lives. The same thing happens with technology in developing countries — it has to be all or nothing. In between is the killer.

This suggests that techno-savvy development should probably be concentrated massively on small areas, to get them to a "post-industrial" level. This will avoid spreading investment thinly and falling short of the critical point. Such small, intensive cases will be experiments, yielding different schemes, seeing what works. If even the Earth Firsters can come to see that development need not mean deforestation and the Glen Canyon Dam, a new direction in resolute ecovirtue could open.

For the moment they are mere cranks, oddities, wild-eyed nobodies on their rickety soapboxes. But their numbers rise. Their actions gather allies. Their anger soars. We must defuse that anger with actions of our own.

The zealot who could design a SuperFlu might well come from citadels of high moral purpose, too. Many Deep Ecologists spring from our universities. They have surplus cash and need a cause larger than themselves. Their moral fervor runs parallel with high education and not a little dedication. After all, the most notorious mass murderer of our century came from the culture of Mozart and Goethe, favored animal rights, and was a fastidious vegetarian.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: molsen@vmsa.oac.uci.edu

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Dave Bischoff has not appeared in our pages since April, 1980, an absence of far too many years. Since then he has moved all over the country, finally winding up in Eugene, Oregon. He wrote "Santa Ritual Abuse" for a Christmas Eve reading with the writers there, inspired by his first dark and rainy winter.

Dave has published about fifty novels, the most recent being The Judas Cross, *which he wrote with Nebula and Hugo winner Charles Sheffield. The book appeared as part of the new Warner/Aspect book line in December.*

Santa Ritual Abuse

By David Bischoff

THE DAY AFTER THANKSgiving, the specials at Fat Chung Wo's restaurant by Larry's Loft featured turkey lo mein, turkey chop suey and turkey fuk yew. In the lobby, there was a sprig of evergreen coming out of Buddha's head, and a little manger scene with Salvation Army stickers still on Joseph and Mary. Christmastime was coming to Eugene, Oregon.

I walked into the Loft, went to the bar and ordered a cup of coffee and a bowl of hot and sour from the bartender. He stuck the order for the soup through the window into the Chinese restaurant that makes like a Siamese twin to the bar, and then he got me my coffee. Caffeinated mud, as usual. Professor's coffee. I'm a professor. I like the stuff.

"Pete," said Jurgen the bartender as I poured some milk into my steaming cup. "Check out the dude at the other end."

I casually glanced up at the mirror past the garden of colored bottle spouts behind him. At the opposite end of the old-fashioned worn wood bar, feet hooked in the slats of his stool as though they were stirrups, was an old

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wizened guy with a brown roadster cap, a pint of Widmer Hefewizen beer at one elbow, a shot glass of whiskey in front of him. He regarded the whiskey glumly for a moment, then picked it up, drained it, and followed that with a chug of Hef. He pulled out an unfiltered Chesterfield from a cellophaned pack, and lit it with an orange Bic lighter. Burning Virginia fields. Alcohol-preserved Americana.

I sipped at my coffee. "So?"

"It's Santa."

Jurgen was an erstwhile grad student at the University of Oregon who stayed on. His accent stayed on too, and he spoke with an exaggerated sibilance about his 's's and 'z's, especially when he was excited, as he clearly was now.

"Zanta? Zanta who?"

"Santa Claus." As in Klaus von Bulow. "He's been here all day, drinking hard."

Oh, I thought. The traditional drunken department store Santa, taking the afternoon off from dandling kiddies on his knee to get soused.

"I didn't know Eugene had a Macy's," I said.

Jurgen looked at me in his constipated Hitler youth grimace, and whispered. "Nein. No. That is really Santa Claus. He lives in Pleasant Hill in the summer. He's usually up at the North Pole by now. Something's wrong." Jurgen shook his head, looking glum.

Hey. I had my own problems. Lost my girlfriend to a New Age Bullshitter. Still deep in California-style credit-card debt. And my goddamned cats had starting turning their noses up at the food I was feeding them. They were taking longer alley jaunts, too, so I figured they must be getting nutrition elsewhere.

The last time I'd talked to Becky, she'd been unsympathetic. "Sounds just like you. Why not feed them something else for a change?"

"They were strays. They were perfectly happy with generic food until you started bringing over that Iams crap."

"You know, cats have feelings too. One of these days they just might decide their stray life was better and not come back! Don't take them for granted like you did me, Ted. You know you're nuts about them!"

The conversation went downhill from there.

Something wrong...

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I was about to say something like "No presents under O Tannenbaum this year, Jurg?" but I bit my tongue. I've only been here for six months, but I've already realized that things are a bit off kilter in Eugene, Oregon, and reality sometimes gets a little unstuck. I don't know, maybe it's all the rain and gloom.

"You talk to him about it yet?"

"No. He seems too morose."

A bell dinged, snapping Jurgen out of contemplation. He brought my soup to me, then went to wash some glasses as I set to the tangy stuff. Munching on peppery tiger lilies reflectively, I looked over to the guy at the other end of the bar. Jurgen had already set him up with another shot, but the guy was just staring at it, not drinking. He just puffed on his Chesterfield from time to time, wrinkled face squinting through the smoke.

The dissertation was going nowhere, and I didn't have a class to teach until the next afternoon. I didn't feel like going to a movie or reading a book. I had some time to kill, so I thought, hell. Why not give it a try?

I grunted up at the TV screen hanging in the corner from chains. "Blazers not doing so well this year, huh?"

The old man grunted.

"Don't like basketball?"

"Nope."

I tapped a sign off to my left, displaying a Budweiser ad.

"Drinks are cheap here during Blazers games."

"Yeah, if you drink piss-water. No way, José."

"You like the micro-brew, huh?"

"I guess."

"Hefewizen from the look of it. Wheat beer." I felt like the *Saturday Night Live* character by the copy machine. "Hey Santa. It's the Santerminator. It's the Klaus-meister." But I had to keep the conversation going in order to draw him out. "Jurgen's from Heidelberg." I mimicked the bartender's accent. "'Hefewizen! Dis iss nott Hefewizen!'"

The guy took the whiskey down in one gulp, turned and looked at me. Dead eyes with just a hint of a glare.

"Ja. Das Hefewizen ist fer dumbkopfs," he said. "Believe me, my talkative bar companion, I know my Hefewizen. Part of me is German."

"Really? Your sense of humor?"

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That got a lemon twist of a smile. "Nein. Mein noodle, I think." He tapped his head.

I took a sip of my coffee. It had gone cold.

Some other time, some other place I would have just let the whole matter drop. But the outside was cold and dim, and the lights inside were warm and friendly, and I sensed a good story here in this old addle-brained barfly.

"Would a drink buy a few words from you?"

"How come you want some words from *me*?"

"Jurgen says you're Santa Claus."

"Jurgen has a big mouth." However, he shrugged. "No big secret though. You look close enough around this town, you find things out." He pushed his glass forward. "Dickel. George Dickel. Good stuff. Why don't you have some?"

"I'd like to. I'd like to have some Hefewizen too. Can't. I did a lifetime's worth of drinking in about ten years, so I figured I'd see what the rest of my life would be like sober."

Santa grunted. "Good for you, chum."

I waved to Jurgen, got Santa another Dickel, another Hef, and myself another cuppa. I took the liberty of sitting down close to him. He smelled of the alcohol and cigarettes, but there were also more scents in the not-unpleasant miasma. Couldn't quite put my finger on their identity. There was also just a hint of rosy cheeks on his face. His skin hung on him as though he once had considerable weight. Most startlingly, from time to time his eyes would suddenly twinkle, like an Industrial Light and Magic effect.

"Does this mean I get an extra gift in my stocking?" I said to start things off.

"Hell," said Santa. "I don't feel like flinging the shit this year." He shook his head, his shoulders drooping as though they carried the weight of centuries upon them. "Year in, year out, same old, same old." He tapped out another cigarette. "Man, this year Santa's pulling the plug. Santa's got the blues, and Santa's just not going to put out."

"You'd think they'd give you a year off once in a while."

"You'd think."

"What about the elves?"

"Elves?" He looked at me as though I were the biggest rube in the universe. "What, you buy that nonsense?" He tapped his chest. "Let me tell

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you, this guy ain't got no long-eared fairies dancing with bells on their toes. And he ain't got no goddamned old hag making gingerbread cookies in the kitchen. This is 1994, you dork. We're through with that Victorian schmaltz!" He took a noisy slurp of his brew, and belched.

"What about the reindeer?"

His eyes became slits. "Let 'em go a long time ago. I think I saw one the other day on Route 5. Roadkill." He seemed to find that amusing. A little pre-cancerous chuckle gurgled in his throat. Nothing whatsoever of that fabled bowlful of jelly. A twinkle again, and then he settled down about his drink, like a surly black cloud.

I could see why Jurgen was depressed. Santa or no, this fellow was spreading poison, not cheer. I took a moment to fend off some of the blackness myself. I could almost feel it in the air, a palpable extension of this ornery bag of bone and skin, gristle, nicotine and alcohol before me.

Twelve-steps time.

Higher Power, I thought. I don't want a drink this time, just a little sunshine.

And Higher Power said, Make this poor old sod a little more cheerful, and you'll get yours, Bozo.

Higher Power tends to get a tad abusive when I ask dumb questions, but she always delivers.

I thought for a moment about taking Santa for a ride. Show him the Fifth Street Market, all decked with holly and light and brightness. Point to the huge PEACE ON EARTH sign glowing against Skinner's Butte. Ride him along the Willamette or McKenzie river and point out all the gaily decorated houses.

Take him to Handel's *Messiah* at the Hult Center. Show him some sort of charity effort. The usual folderol and fa-la-la that jumpstarts feeble seasons' spirit.

No, I thought.

He's seen all that. Maybe that's part of what's depressing him. What had he said? Same old, same old. The monotony of repetition.

Maybe good old-fashioned guilt-pudding would work.

"Well, we seem to have a problem this year," I said lightly. "Seems to me, a lot of people get blue this time of the year. And if Mr. Source of Cheer and Presents and Glad Tidings gets down, a lot of people are going to have a really

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rotten Christmas. You want that on your shoulders?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Fuck 'em."

Boy, that got me. I'm no innocent, and when the old toe gets stubbed, I guess it triggers some profanity in me. But Santa Claus? That was almost too much.

I remember back when I used to work at a magazine in New York. The cartoon editor wanted to print a picture of Santa Claus wielding a hatchet amongst a room of blood-spattered dead people. "Merry Ax-mas" was the caption. The art director freaked out. She was a tough, no-nonsense feminist who ate frijoles con cojones at Mexican dinners, but you didn't mess with Santa, no ma'am.

I didn't get angry. I stayed cool. After all there had to be a good reason for all this.

I asked.

He glared. "Look, bub. First of all, how would *you* like to be an archetype?"

"Oh. You mean as in Jungian theory?"

"Jungian Fungian. I'm a goddamned literalization! I mean, you know, legend and myth and superstition and millions of bleating little childish minds and adult ritual through film and art and literature and heaven knows what else. There's a lot of power in all that. Things happen. Things like me happen."

I live in Eugene, home of the smug and the weird. I'm not sure I entirely accept the evidence of the bizarre that makes this town of the river valley such a nexus for the strangest part of Truth, but neither do I discount it.

"Hey. Come on," I said, not really knowing what I was saying, just going for a ride on the galloping words. "Look, whether you're really Santa or not, you know there's help available. You got AA for the drinking, you got churches for spiritual woes, you got shrinks and hospitals for mental wounds..." I looked at my watch. "And most are still open."

"Right. Maybe I should just call the Santa Hotline. The Archetype Suicide Aid. Look, just bug off, Mister. What the hell do you know about being trapped inside a paradigm of goofy custom and pagan practices by nominal Christians who work themselves into a goony commercial frenzy each year in the hope of goosing their pathetic economies so they can buy fancy coffins for themselves when they croak."

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You know, I thought, the old guy had a point there.

And you know, that glass of Hefewizen was looking awful good.

I reached out for it.

"What the hell are you doing, buddy?"

I put it under my nose.

Sniffed it.

Lemon and barley, a tingle of effervescence. Feathery hops, under tranquil autumn skies, bursting still with summer's sun.

Ah.

I put the glass down.

"I can't drink it anymore," I said. "I like to smell it, though."

"Shit. And people say I'm strange."

It was a start. I'd gotten him interested. I told him some of my story. University assistant prof, working part time on a book. Tired of the usual American academic hustle, broken up with a girlfriend decides to escape to the Great American Northwest, land of good coffee, delicious grunge rock, fresh air, and wonderful smelling beer.

I'd just ordered another coffee when the woman walked in wearing the elf costume.

I hadn't cheered the guy up, but he'd stopped ordering shots of George Dickel and looked a bit less dead. However, when that sexy elf walked in, the temperature at Larry's Loft warmed considerably.

She was one of those blondes with long legs and frilly hair they sign up all the time for the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders. Pretty and busty, but sweet and wholesome. She was in one of those classic Playboy Santa's Helper's outfits they put on seasonal mall workers to keep the daddies' interest. She wore more makeup than the entire city of Eugene on a work day.

As she walked past me, I got a whiff of flowery perfume and mistletoe. The wolf in me leaped, but propriety kept it on its leash.

She wasn't interested in me, though.

Her objective: Santa Claus.

She draped a bare arm around his shoulder.

"Hi there, big guy. Buy a girl a drink?"

Santa shrugged indifferently.

She turned to me and winked. Suddenly I recognized her. It was Kimberly, a cute weekend waitress here who usually dressed in baggy jeans

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and loose flannel. Jurgen must have called her. The idea of a morose Santa was likely not appealing to him, and he had taken extreme measures.

"I'm springing for Santa's drinks tonight," I said gaily. "Got to cheer him up somehow. What are you having?"

"Eggnog. Punch. Christmas cheer of some sort. And bring the crestfallen saint some as well."

"You two know each other?"

Santa grunted.

"I've served him a drink or two. So come on, Santa." She did a very good model's pirouette. "I've lost five pounds this year. How does the outfit look?"

"Cold," said Santa.

She pouted. "Look, I'm a Women's Studies major, dammit. This is costing a lot. I just can't stand to see you *get* like this."

Santa swung an ancient, heavy-lidded gaze our way. "What do you people know? What do you know of despair? A few clouds. A few drizzles. You lucky jerks are young, grow old and die, often with admirable quickness. A brief pathetic flicker. Me, I just grow old and don't die, dragging my sorry butt from Christmas to Christmas, crucified upon boughs of holly, blood weeping from a forehead pierced by thorns of mistletoe."

The Christmas cheer came, mine appropriately Virgin.

Kimberly climbed up on a stool beside me and addressed hers. "Well, I tried."

"Say, Kim. I think you've inspired a sonnet from me. Can I take you out to dinner and read it to you sometime?"

She gave me a frosty look. "Sorry, guy. This is my charity work for the year."

Oh well. I tried.

I'd just started to suck up some nog and was thinking about maybe just abandoning the good ship Cheer Up Santa, when three new customers walked into the room.

"Uh oh," said Kimberly. She twirled around in her seat. "Jurgen, I *told* you not to call *them*."

Jurgen shrugged. "I've got to do something! 'Stille Nacht' is going to stick in my throat this year otherwise!"

The new arrivals went immediately behind Santa, who made every effort to ignore them.

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One was a fat fellow in a huge robe.

One was a Victorian style Father Christmas, equally large and jolly.

The final was a slight fellow in hooded monk's robe.

The huge-robed guy tapped Santa on the back.

"We are the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, Future. We come — "

Santa wheeled around. He pulled something up from under his shirt and belt, brandished it.

A small service revolver.

Santa Claus was packing heat!

His eyes were fired with indignation. "Look, you pests. Get it through your skulls. I *want* to be miserable. I *need* to be miserable. Does every liberal-assed Jack and Jane have to go around in this knee-jerk town with a smile on their face? I tell you, it makes me want to puke!"

The Ghosts held up their hands and wandered off to the end of the bar, muttering. Jurgen got them something to drink, presumably strong.

Santa huffed, put his gun back in his belt and lifted his glass of Hef. He drained it, put it back down, and belched fruitily. He stubbed out his cigarette in a tray and turned to face me, pointing a nicotine-stained finger my way.

"And you, buddy — your world ain't sweetness and light and neither is mine. At least I park my butt down long enough in one place to realize that."

Without a word of thanks or farewell, not even a breath of "And to all a good night," the dour, sour Santa glowered out of Larry's Loft.

I went back to the Ghosts and Jurgen.

"I tried."

"He gets like this some years," said the Ghost of Christmas Present, pulling his hat back to reveal the bar's burly bouncer.

"I've never seen him this bad," said the Ghost of Christmas Past, whom I'd already recognized as a member of a local rock band.

The Ghost of Christmas Future was gone, apparently through the labyrinthine halls to seek a leak.

"Thanks for coming, guys," said Jurgen, "Nice try, but — "

The phone rang and Kimberly picked it up, talked for a minute.

"It was Jerry," she said after hanging up. "He says he can't make it."

Jurgen and the others did double-takes.

"But if that was Jerry, who was the Ghost of Christmas Future?" said Jurgen.

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"And *where* is he?" said Kimberly.

"I think," I said, "He's out doing something rather disrespectful on my grave."

WHEN I got back to my apartment it was bleak and cold.

Thank God I didn't have a door knocker; it would have turned to Marley's Ghost for sure. I was that rattled, that affected. Eugene looked mottled and grimy in the early evening beneath cheap and occasional streetlights, the Christmas displays looking like paste jewelry draped on a once pretty whore. Gone were the golden halcyon days of summer and color-streaked fall, smells all bright and fresh. Here was darkness and death and potholes, tattered lawns and a wet winter fitting over the town like an old musty sock.

I opened a can of generic cat food for Fred and Ethel outside on the balcony, but got no takers. I wondered if they'd abandoned me.

I tried to work on my book, but nothing seemed to come out of my head.

TV was after-sweeps week re-runs.

Santa was right.

Maybe this *was* a year we could do without Christmas. What would it hurt?

I went to bed and, tossing and turning in the tar pits of insomnia, plotted a new TV series.

Santa Claus, P.I.

I think the sun became depressed as well — it went into immediate hiding.

The sky went through cycles of damp and drizzle and gray, to damp and drizzle and dark. When I'd moved to Eugene, people had warned me about the Northwest Weather. Hey, I'd said, no problem. I'm a cerebral person, there's so much to do inside beneath the comfort of artificial lighting.

The darkness seemed to seep through the curtains, though, curling chill and somber around my guts. Once only touched by slight melancholy, my heart became a sodden cloud. I didn't know if that guy at Larry's Loft was really S. Claus or not, but he certainly had a valid point, a thought that would always come to me right after Thanksgiving, come to a lot of people.

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Christmas came far too soon. Christmas came far too often. Christmas was wearing out its welcome in its weary repetition, its asinine customs and its wretched commercialism and pointlessness.

I made a self-satisfied note of that and filed it in my brain, bought more Brand X kibble for the cats, and by God, the slaves broke down and ate it like I knew they would. I made them rub my legs and beg a little first.

Still, even though I'd buried the whole Christmas issue in its vault, and life returned to its chores of lectures and grading papers and chipping away at my book, the dark and the clouds still lingered, along with that sense of dullness and joylessness of life, like a good rock song turned down low on a cheap transistor radio.

I was walking out of the central post office one day, a wad of bills clenched in my hand, disappointed that my *New Yorker* magazine was late, when I thought I saw him again. Santa. Coming out of the pastry shop down the block. The facade of the store was twinkling with lights and artificial snow and evergreen and Santa had a shopping bag in one hand and was munching away at a big Napoleon with the other. It was kind of far away and I don't have the best vision, but he looked, I thought, a little fleshier. I was about to run up and get a better look when a familiar voice called my name.

I turned around and there was Becky, on her way into the Post Office. I knew it was inevitable that I'd run into her eventually, in fact I was surprised I hadn't seen her yet. Nonetheless, I felt a little tentative, a little nervous, pain and regret uncoiling from their hibernation.

"Hello," I said.

"How's it going?" she said. "I was going to call you. Been putting it off." The cold had given her face color and life. "I wasn't very nice to you last time we talked. Maybe that's the way I deal with that kind of thing."

"Cauterization?"

"Something like that."

I nodded. "Thanks. Oh well."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Our breaths misted and I shoved my cold hands in the pockets of my coat. The smell of car exhaust hovered, obliterating the smell of evergreen.

"I thought maybe you'd like to come to my Christmas party."

"Mr. Buddha going to be there?"

"Yes."

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I shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Okay."

"See you around."

"Merry Christmas."

"Yeah. You too."

I went to my car. There was a parking ticket sticking up from the windshield.

And a Happy New Year.

Classes were over, papers were graded, students were gone.

Mid-December.

I walked from my apartment to get some Middle Eastern take-out. Somehow I thought hummus and babba ghonouj would invoke some Semitic sun in my heart.

Outside it was still wet from the most recent rain, and the world seemed muffled, dying. There was the smell of rotting leaves in the gutter, the sour stench of Springfield wood pulp factories drifting in with the fog.

The universe seemed leached of joy, as though someone had sucked out all the serotonin from the Cosmic Mind.

Tomorrow and tomorrow...

The ways to dusty death...

Full of sound and fury...

Signifying nothing.

For the first time in my life, I wanted something more than a drink. I wanted a fistful of Prozac.

God, what had I done? Why had I come to this place? Even now, in Southern California they may be breathing smog and shooting each other, but at least they had some passion down there. The cold and the dark had frozen my spirit inside of me like crystallized sap, and I could feel nothing but a dull ache.

I found myself heading for Larry's Loft instead of the take-out joint. I hurried past the Salvation Army guy outside the Kiva Grocery Store along the way. His bell rang mournfully in the dusk.

Larry's wasn't busy yet, so I sat at the bar, ordered a coffee, stared up at the TV. What was the name of that old Roxy Music album? *Champagne and Novocaine.* Tell me about it. Kimberly came up with a big drink order.

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"Hey guy. You look like somebody just ran over your cat."

"That would be good news. Least I wouldn't have to feed them then."

"Whoa. Hey, is this the same cheerful summer soul who danced into our lives this year?" She was wearing her usual flannel and jeans, but her hair was still nicely shaped, with a few sprigs of Christmas laced through it, offset by holly earrings.

"In case you hadn't noticed, it's winter," I said. "You know, it being the Yuletide season, I don't think a few beers would hurt me."

I'd already checked in with my Higher Power, but she was out Christmas shopping.

Kimberly looked at me crossly. "You don't want to do that, guy. Look, you just have the Winter Blues, that's all."

"I tell you, that run-in with that guy who said he was Santa didn't help much."

She laughed, made a dismissing motion with her hand. "Oh, that happens just about every year here. And it's part of the tradition that we try and cheer him up. This year was just particularly grim. He always bounces back, though. Look!" She pointed up at the TV, and there, sure enough, was Santa, looking fat and jolly as ever, one hand waving at the universe, one hand on Vanna White's backside.

I shook my head. "No. Nonsense."

"Look. Come on, oh dweller of the south. You think you're the first person to get depressed this time of year? You don't think lots of European Dark Agers shivered in their huts, standing on the brink of a long cold winter without electricity... You don't think that maybe they decided, hey...we'd better do something to cheer ourselves up. Voilà. Winter solstice. Yuletide. Christmas."

Her drink order was up, and she hauled it away.

I sat and thought about this a moment. I noticed they were serving hot mulled cider, so I ordered the non-alcoholic version. Santa was off the TV screen, but a guy came in the bar wearing a tie that twinkled with tiny Christmas lights who looked a little like him.

I was staring at the Christmas tree, all tinsel and sparkling ornaments against the bar mirror, when I caught a glimpse of myself.

Hell. *I* looked like the guy who'd called himself Santa Claus. And *this* Santa was a *real* asshole.

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I finished the spiced cider, a warmth in my stomach, a tang in my mouth. I pulled out my billfold and paid for the drink. After a dollar tip, that left me with a twenty dollar bill and a five.

"Hey, where you going?" said Kimberly. "I'm going to put some mistletoe in my hair in a minute."

"Can I have a rain check?"

"What — in this town, that wouldn't be good until spring."

I smiled and waved good-bye.

Outside, fog was static in the streets, and the sound of traffic, the squelch of tires was almost comforting. The tinkle of the Salvation Army bell drifted directionless and invisible, like the ghost of zombie reindeer sleighbells.

As I walked up to the man in uniform, I bunched up the two bills, and reached over to drop them in the kettle.

A thought struck me, and I stopped.

I separated the five from the twenty, and then slipped Andrew Jackson through the slot.

"Thank you, sir, and a Merry Christmas, sir."

"Same to you, soldier," I said.

As I pulled up my collar against the cold, I was wondering if I'd turn into Jimmy Stewart and run around embracing people. I was relieved when I didn't. I didn't feel that much better, but then...so what?

Some recovering drunks say that if a Higher Power really doesn't exist, then it's their job to create that Higher Power in themselves; or at the very least, act as though that Higher Power was there. When Faith fails you, when Will can't get off its perverse butt, and there's a bottle of smooth distilled hell on your table with a clean tumbler beside it and a bucket of cracked ice and you've got a hole in your soul that can only be chilled and numbed away... The only thing left, I guess, is Imagination.

My Higher Power may have been out shopping, but that was because she'd already given me my gift. I just hadn't opened it until I'd looked into the mirror at Larry's Loft.

I went into the grocery store to buy my animals a few cans of name brand cat chow with the five I'd saved for them.

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Alan Brennert's appearances in F&SF *are too few and far between, but they are always worth the wait. His last story, "Ma Qui," in February 1991 won him the Nebula Award for Best Short Story. That same year, he won an Emmy for his work on the television series* L.A. Law. *In the years since, he has co-written the libretto for an sf musical,* Weird Romance, *with music by Alan Menken. (The cast album is available on CD from Columbia Records — and is one of my favorites.) Alan is currently adapting one of his short stories as an episode of the revived* Outer Limits *series for Showtime — and, thankfully, he is writing more short fiction.*

Cradle

By Alan Brennert

Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave.
— Joseph Hall

"HOW MUCH?"

The girl was barely eighteen, long, straight red hair almost to her waist, a pretty face made hard by too much makeup and by wary, friendless eyes. She shifted a little in her seat, too-short skirt hitching up to reveal a flash of thigh, in a naive attempt, perhaps, to somehow influence the young attorney who sat opposite her. Marguerite, watching from a corner of the office, smiled to herself. Not very bright, but then, that really didn't matter, did it?

Ziegler slid the contract across the top of the big teak desk. "Ten thousand dollars," he said, showing no signs of being overwhelmed by teen sexuality. "Plus a *per diem*" — she looked blank at that — "a daily living expense during the nine months you carry the child. Fifty dollars a day for two hundred and seventy days — less, of course, if you deliver prematurely — for an aggregate total of twenty-three thousand, five hundred dollars."

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The girl — what was her name again? Sondra? — seemed to contemplate that a long moment. She glanced casually around the expansive office with its hardwood floors and Paul Klee prints, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the brightly lit fountains of Century City at night, as though assessing Marguerite's worth by the company she kept (or employed). Then, with a frown, she shook her head. "Make it an even twenty-five," she said emphatically.

Ziegler looked to Marguerite, who kept her amusement to herself — such a shrewd bargainer: a paltry fifteen hundred extra! — then nodded, silently.

"Agreed," said the attorney. "Now, in looking over the adoption agreement, you'll see there are some standard provisions to which you must adhere: No drug, alcohol, or tobacco use during the pregnancy; regular obstetrical examinations, which we will of course provide — "

Sondra frowned as she scanned the document. "What's this?" she interrupted. "'If circumstances warrant, surrogate agrees to domicile — '"

"At Ms. LeCourt's home, yes. That is, should there be any complications in the pregnancy — unlikely, but you never know — Ms. LeCourt would feel more secure having you nearby, with access to proper help. At which point, of course, we'd engage the services of a full-time nurse, and Dr. Chernow" — he nodded toward the portly, balding man seated next to Marguerite — "would make daily visits." For the first time Sondra seemed hesitant.

Marguerite softly cleared her throat, and all eyes in the room were, just like that, suddenly on her. She looked at the young woman and smiled. "I don't think you'll find it that hard to take, Sondra," she said warmly. "I've been told I have a very comfortable home."

Sondra smiled uncertainly, though she seemed more puzzled, now, than reluctant. "Listen," she said, finally, "this is none of my business, I know, and you can tell me to go to hell if you want, but —

"Because you're infertile, it's my eggs that'll be fertilized, right? And Mr. Ziegler tells me the sperm donor is anonymous. You've never even met him, right?"

Marguerite nodded.

"So it's a kid made by two strangers. No connection to you at all. Why go to all this trouble? Why not a normal adoption? You're got the money to get any kid you want. What do you get out of this?"

Marguerite was impressed; she hadn't expected the thought would even occur to Sondra, much less matter to her. Still, just to be safe, Marguerite had

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practiced her response. Time had taken the innocence from her still-youthful face, but she knew that very youthfulness could work for her here, adding poignancy to her words. She leaned forward, voice purposely soft.

"I want," she said, "the chance to watch my child grow. From a thought, to an embryo; from embryo to fetus; from fetus to child. I want to hear its heartbeat, faint inside you; I want to be able to put my hand on your stomach and feel my son, or daughter, move. I want to be able to feel ...if only for a moment...that it's inside *me*. By being there, with you, as it grows...maybe it will seem more like it's really mine."

Sondra listened, touched despite herself. Then, after only a moment's hesitation, she flipped to the last page of the contract, looked at Ziegler.

"Can I have a pen?" she asked.

Marguerite smiled.

The sleek white chauffeured Mercedes ghosted down Sunset Boulevard, passengers hidden behind tinted windows like riders on a phantom carriage. Inside, Chernow said, "She's brighter than she looks, but not quite as bright as she thinks she is. She knew insemination doesn't require removal of the ova, but when I told her we needed to do it to rule out genetic defects, she accepted it without a further thought."

Marguerite lit a cigarette — a poor substitute for blood, but at least she didn't have to worry about cancer. "And there's nothing about the procedure itself that will cause her to suspect how — experimental — it really is?"

Chernow shook his head. "We've already done the hard work. Considering the ways in which your DNA was altered, just before your death, it's remarkable it took us only two years to reproduce the genetic code. Once we remove the surrogate's ova, she'll have no inkling her DNA's being wiped from the eggs — or that yours is being imprinted onto them. All she'll actually *see* are the fertilized eggs being implanted in her uterus."

Marguerite exhaled a stream of smoke. She would have to quit, of course, before the baby arrived. "And then?"

"Then, with luck, a normal pregnancy, a normal birth. Though obviously, since no one's ever tried this before, we can't know for certain."

Marguerite nodded. The car turned up Queens Road, high above Sunset, toward the doctor's pied-à-terre in the hills; Marguerite glanced to her left and caught a glimpse of the golden lattice of lights — gridwork constellations extending to the horizon — that Los Angeles became at night. She would have dearly loved to see it, just once, by day: and not just on videotape.

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"Marguerite?"

She turned. "Yes, Stewart?"

Chernow hesitated. "I...have my anxieties about this procedure."

"Why? It won't harm the surrogate, will it?"

"Not the process itself, no. But your DNA was altered, irrevocably, by the bite that...transformed you. Some of your — characteristics — will doubtless be passed on, genetically. Almost certainly your child will be, at least partly, a vampire."

Marguerite nodded. "I know that. I accepted that long ago." She studied him. "And that frightens you?"

"I...don't like the idea," he said in measured tones, "that I've helped create a new way for your — kind — to propagate themselves."

Marguerite laughed. "Stewart, trust me, the old method of propagation is far faster and more efficient than this," she said, smiling. When he didn't join her, she put a hand on his. "Stewart...you've known me for twenty years. I don't hunt; not when I can buy as much blood as I want. I don't seek the company of others of my 'kind.' I have no lust for power, or conquest, at least not any more."

She took his hand in hers, and held it as gently as her great strength allowed. "I was twenty-five when I died," she said, and this time the softness in her tone was genuine. "I never had a chance to have a child. Two hundred years later — science offers me that chance. That's all I want." She let go of his hand. "What does anyone want?" she said quietly, looking away. "To be loved unconditionally. To be loved, despite who I am, all that I've done..."

She looked back at the lights. "That's all," she said, and it was the truth.

Chernow took her hand again; she looked up at him. Centuries of reading men's faces as they gazed at her told her, clearly and sadly, what was in his. They both knew he could not love her in the way she needed; no mortal could.

"Then you won't mind," he said gently, "if I destroy my notes afterward?"

Marguerite smiled. "If that makes you feel better," she said, "by all means."

The procedure did, in fact, proceed as planned; Sondra's "decoded" ova were imprinted, successfully, with Marguerite's exotic DNA, fertilized by the donor sperm, and implanted once again in Sondra's womb. Fourteen weeks later, ultrasound revealed a fetal skeleton, normal in all ways for that stage of development; a week later, amniocentesis confirmed the fetus was male. In the sixteenth week, the first fetal heartbeat could be heard, faint but

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thrilling to Marguerite, who had no heartbeat, no pulse of her own: her child was *alive*. It would breathe (already the placental villi were enlarged, drawing oxygen from the maternal blood), its heart would pump blood (unlike hers, merely a conduit through which blood moved by preternatural means: almost a living fluid that animated her, instead of itself *being* animated). Her son would be human.

Chernow was not so sure. Alive, yes; human, not necessarily. A hybrid, perhaps, of the living and the undead...with certain characteristics of both.

Marguerite knew this, intellectually, but the first time she placed her hand on Sondra's stomach — the first time she felt the baby move inside the womb — all such thoughts became remote. Something lived inside there: for the first time in two hundred years, something of Marguerite lived. That was all she knew.

It was in the eighteenth week the first complications appeared. Normally, a pregnant woman's blood volume increases by twenty-five per cent by the time of delivery, while her red blood cell count actually decreases, as the fetus absorbs maternal blood through the placenta. Sondra's blood volume increased by twenty-five percent within the first trimester alone, and her red cell and hemoglobin counts plunged to nearly half their normal levels. She began experiencing acute anemia: attacks of vertigo, extreme fatigue, drowsiness, a constant ringing in her ears.

Tests showed Sondra's bone marrow producing staggering numbers of red cells in response to a vastly increased appetite for blood protein and nitrogen on the part of the fetus; it was literally sucking the blood from its mother's body at a prodigious — and alarming — rate. Her body was producing all the blood it could, but it wasn't enough; Chernow began augmenting this with weekly transfusions of plasma, as well as mega-doses of calcium to fortify her bone marrow.

This worked, to a point, but in the middle of her seventh month, when Sondra collapsed suddenly outside Beverly Center, an even larger problem presented itself.

Thank God she had remained conscious, and told the paramedics to bring her to Chernow's office rather than nearby Cedars-Sinai; Lord only knew what the obstetricians there would have made of what they found. Even Chernow didn't realize at first what had happened. It was another anemic episode, yes — but severely acute, and one that seemed to reverse itself within minutes of Sondra coming into the office. He ran more blood tests; it was all he could do.

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That night, he reluctantly gave Marguerite the results.

"Sondra's red blood cells are perfectly normal," he explained over dinner (his, not hers) at Marguerite's Holmsby Hills mansion. "But as soon as they cross the placental barrier into the fetus, they suddenly begin to...superheat. The blood plasma literally begins to evaporate, and the fetus, starved for blood, draws even more of it from the mother's body...only to have that evaporate, as well."

Marguerite, shaken, stared at her empty plate. "This attack. It occurred...outside?"

Chernow nodded gravely. "A bright, sunny day. Once we got her inside, the red-cell evaporation began to slow, then reverse itself. After the tests came in, I had Sondra sit under a UV lamp for half an hour; the anemia returned in force."

Marguerite shut her eyes against the realization.

"I think the time may have come for her to...come live with you," Chernow said quietly. "The sunguards on your windows, the shutters, the heavy curtains...they should protect the fetus, and, by extension, Sondra, as well."

Marguerite was silent a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "I dreamt," she said, finally, "that my child would play in the sun."

Chernow took a shallow breath. "That's not going to happen, Marguerite." A moment, then: "I'm sorry."

And so Sondra came to live with Marguerite, never suspecting, of course, anything more than what Chernow told her: that they needed to keep close watch on her from now on; that the shades were drawn because of the spots she sometimes saw before her eyes, a result of the anemia; that all other signs were positive, and they were confident she would have a healthy baby and a safe delivery. Which was, by and large, true.

Nurses attended her twenty-four hours a day, and the luxuries of Marguerite's home — maids to wait on her, to draw her bath; cooks to prepare elegant meals; a private screening room with hundreds of films available to her — seemed to buoy her spirits, at least temporarily.

She saw little of Marguerite, who "worked" during the day and never appeared until after sunset; and, even then, lingered just long enough to listen to her child's heartbeat, feel him move inside Sondra, make some perfunctory small talk, then disappear once more, leaving Sondra alone, feeling little more than a womb for hire; a shell. But then (she told herself) that's all she'd wanted to be, wasn't it?

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One night well into the ninth month, Marguerite awoke to find Sondra missing — having missed dinner, and apparently given the household help the proverbial slip. Frantic, Marguerite searched the house in a panic, then raced onto the grounds. There were a good fifteen acres of land surrounding the house, a labyrinth of hedges and gardens, and it was here that Marguerite, with vast relief, discovered her — skipping flat stones across the surface of the koi pond. Marguerite was brought up short: Sondra suddenly looked nothing like the crass nymphet selected for that very crassness (and so less likely to contest the baby's custody) but like a lonely little girl.

She heard Marguerite behind her; turned. "Hi."

Marguerite took a step toward her. "You...had us worried. Maria said you didn't show up for dinner."

Sondra shrugged. "Wasn't hungry." She turned back, skipped the last stone across the pond. "Had another anemia spell this afternoon. Still feeling kind of woozy."

Marguerite moved a bit closer. "I'm sorry. We never expected this to be so painful for you."

Sondra smiled lopsidedly. "Yeah, well...you want to hear something really weird?" She shook her head in bemusement. "As shitty as this pregnancy has been...I'm actually kind of...*glad*...I'm pregnant. Is that certifiable, or what?"

Marguerite felt a little chill, and it wasn't the night air. Was Sondra bonding with the unborn child, after all? "Glad? How so?"

Sondra shrugged. "I look around at your house...at these grounds...I think about all the money you must have — "

Damn, Marguerite thought. *A renegotiation ploy? Is that —*

"And I think..." Sondra hesitated; Marguerite steeled herself. "I think about how lucky this kid is going to be," Sondra said quietly. "How much you'll be able to do for him. And it makes me feel...proud, I guess...that I'm helping him have a better life than I've had. You know what I mean?"

Marguerite stood there, surprised by Sondra's response, and more than a little ashamed at her own.

She put a hand, gently, on Sondra's arm.

"Yes," she said, at length. "I know exactly what you mean."

Sondra's contractions began at two o'clock Wednesday afternoon, exactly two hundred and seventy days after the in vitro fertilization. The first one lasted about forty seconds, though Sondra swore it felt more like a minute

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and a half; the second came twenty minutes later. Within the hour Chernow had arrived to whisk Sondra, behind the UV-tinted windows of the Mercedes, to the private clinic in Santa Monica, where the contractions began coming fast and thick. It was three-thirty in the afternoon.

"Where's Marguerite?" Sondra gasped, a nurse sopping her forehead, and Chernow fell back on the if-necessary, pre-arranged lie that she was in San Diego on business, but would be here just as soon as she could. He hoped that Sondra's labor would, like most first-time mothers, last at least thirteen or fourteen hours — placing the actual birth well after sundown.

Still, to be safe, the shades were drawn, the shutters closed — as much for the baby as for Marguerite.

Sondra's water broke about five o'clock that afternoon, and, with Chernow's support, she began bearing down as best she could. Less than an hour later, as dusk fell, Marguerite stirred in her bed, her naked body lying, as always, atop a thin layer of soil from her native Nantes. Her eyes snapped open. Maria — stooped, white-haired, fiercely loyal and protective — stood above her. "The hospital called," she said. "It's time."

If Marguerite's heart had been capable of it, it would have been pounding. She jumped up, kissed Maria on the forehead, and stood by the window. "Please leave now," she said, and Maria, as usual, obeyed wordlessly. Marguerite shut her eyes, picturing her child, hoping — she had no one to pray to — that she would not arrive too late to see him born. A shudder convulsed her body as it folded in on itself, becoming smaller, lighter —

And then she was soaring over the city — sensed more than seen, in this form — heading west to the ocean, hearing/feeling the landscape below her, picking out the sonarform of the clinic, then transforming — flesh expanding, bones lengthening — as she dropped to earth. Inside, Chernow had left a change of clothes for her; she dressed hurriedly and rushed into Sondra's room.

She went immediately to her side, took her hand; Sondra's fingernails bit into her palm, and had Marguerite been merely human, they might have drawn blood. "It's all right," Marguerite said. "Everything's going to be fine." She glanced up at Chernow, as though to ask: *Isn't it?*

Understanding her look, he nodded. "Everything's progressing normally," he said. Within two hours, the top of the baby's head could be seen. And as Sondra's cries of pain filled the room, Marguerite found herself wishing it were she who was crying out — less empathy than envy, because this particular pain was a kind only a mortal woman could know...

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"Push!" Chernow coached. "Push!"

Sondra pushed — and the top of the baby's head popped out of the vaginal canal. But as soon as she saw it — saw its closed eyes and wrinkled skin — Marguerite sensed something was wrong; terribly wrong. She said nothing, but as the infant quickly emerged, Chernow and Sondra sensed something as well. A newborn infant's skin was always wrinkly, but this one's flesh was crepey; almost wizened. There was something horribly familiar about it...and there was no movement. Neck, shoulders, arms, each in their turn appeared...but by the time the infant was pulled out, close to midnight, everyone knew the truth:

The child was dead. Stillborn.

Sondra was crying, mourning the boy who might have had so much. Chernow was stunned. "Everything was proceeding normally..." was all he could say.

Marguerite held out her arms. Chernow cut the umbilical cord, then silently passed the tiny form to her; she paid no mind to the blood and waxy vernix covering its body. Gently she touched the face. Its skin was so old; so very old, before it ever was new. She stroked the baby's head, fingers caressing its ears, its neck, its tiny mouth.

She should have known. Perhaps God, if He existed, had been offended at the thought of life plucked, arrogantly, from the darkest of cradles; or perhaps that Other, with whom she had made a grim compact centuries before, was equally enraged, resentful that one of his subjects was trying to reclaim something he had honestly bargained for, and won. Perhaps it was the one thing that Heaven and Hell could both agree upon.

Gently she caressed the old-man's skin of her never-young son, having recognized it immediately; she had seen it once before, when an undead lover of hers had been struck by a carriage and fallen, no time to change shape, into the River Loire. And she knew that her child, her baby, her first born, had in fact been doomed for hours — since five o'clock that afternoon.

"Running water," was all she said, and no one except Chernow even heard, much less understood. Marguerite held the small, still form to her chest, and hoped, at least, that his soul had flown — that he had been graced with a soul to fly — and that it would know the peace his mother had renounced forever. "Adieu, mon agneau sanglant," she whispered: *Farewell, my bloodied lamb*. And, with a kiss to his forehead, said goodbye to her son.

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman's first novel, The Thread that Binds the Bones, *won the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Horror Novel. Avon published that book and will publish another,* The Silent Strength of Stones, *later this year. Her novelet, "Skeleton Key," (from our August, 1993 issue) made the Locus Recommended Reading List.*

Many of Nina's stories are linked. The families in her novels are related to each other, as are many characters in her stories. For the further adventures of Matt, the protagonist of "Home for Christmas," see Unmasking, *a novella published by Axolotl Press.*

Home for Christmas

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

MATT SPREAD THE CONtents of the wallet on the orange shag rug in front of her, looking at each item. Three oil company charge cards; an auto club card, an auto insurance card; a driver's license which identified the wallet's owner as James Plainfield, thirty-eight, with an address bearing an apartment number in one of the buildings downtown; a gold MasterCard with a hologram of the world on it; a gold AmEx card; six hundred and twenty-three dollars, mostly in fifties; a phone credit card, a laminated library card; five tan business cards with "James Plainfield, Architect" and a phone number embossed on them in brown ink; receipts from a deli, a bookstore, an art supply store; a ticket stub from a horror movie; and two scuffed color photographs, one of a smiling woman and the other of a sullen teenage girl.

The wallet, a soft camel-brown calfskin, was feeling distress. —He's lost without me,— it cried. —he needs me; he could be dead by now. Without me in his back pocket he's only half himself.—

Matt patted it and yawned. She had been planning to walk the frozen streets later that night while people were falling asleep, getting her fill of

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Christmas Eve dreams for another year, feeding the hunger in her that only quieted when she was so exhausted she fell asleep herself. But her feet were wet and she was tired enough to sleep now. She was going to try an experiment: this year, hole up, drink cocoa, and remember all her favorite dreams from Christmas Eves past. If that worked, maybe she could change her lifestyle, stay someplace long enough to...to...she wasn't sure. She hadn't stayed in any one place for more than a month in years.

"We'll go find him tomorrow morning," she said to the wallet. Although tomorrow was Christmas. Maybe he would have things to do, and be hard to find.

—Now!— cried the wallet.

Matt sighed and leaned against the water heater. Her present home was the basement of somebody's house; the people were gone for the Christmas holidays and the house, lonely, had invited her in when she was looking through its garbage cans a day after its inhabitants had driven off in an overloaded station wagon.

—He'll starve,— moaned the wallet, — he'll run out of gas and be stranded. The police will stop him and arrest him because he doesn't have identification. We have to rescue him *now*.—

Matt had cruised town all day, listening to canned Christmas music piped to the freezing outdoors by stores, watching street-corner Santas ringing bells, cars fighting for parking spaces, shoppers whisking in and out of stores, their faces tense; occasionally she saw bright dreams, a parent imagining a child's joy at the unwrapping of the asked-for toy, a man thinking about what his wife's face would look like when she saw the diamond he had bought for her, a girl finding the perfect book for her best friend. There were the dreams of despair, too: grief because five dollars would not stretch far enough, grief because the one request was impossible to fill, grief because weariness made it too hard to go on.

She had wandered, wrapped in her big olive-drab army coat, never standing still long enough for anyone to wonder or object, occasionally ducking into stores and soaking up warmth before heading out into the cold again, sometimes stalling at store windows to stare at things she had never imagined needing until she saw them, then laughing that feeling away. She didn't need anything she didn't have.

She had stumbled over the wallet on her way home. She wouldn't have

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found it — it had slipped down a grate — except that it was broadcasting distress. The grate gapped its bars and let her reach down to get the wallet; the grate was tired of listening to the wallet's whining.

—Now,— the wallet said again.

She loaded all the things back into the wallet, getting the gas cards in the wrong place at first, until the wallet scolded her and told her where they belonged. "So," Matt said, slipping the wallet into her army jacket pocket, "if he's lost, stranded, and starving, how are we going to find him?"

—He's probably at the Time-Out. The bartender lets him run a tab sometimes. He might not have noticed I'm gone yet.—

She knew the Time-Out, a neighborhood bar not far from the corner where James Plainfield's apartment building stood. Two miles from the suburb where her temporary basement home was. She sighed, pulled still-damp socks from their perch on a heating duct, and stuffed her freezing feet into them, then laced up the combat boots. She could always put the wallet outside for the night so she could get some sleep; but what if someone else found it? It would suffer agonies; few people understood nonhuman things the way she did, and fewer still went along with the wishes of inanimate objects.

Anyway, there was a church on the way to downtown, and she always liked to see a piece of the midnight service, when a whole bunch of people got all excited about a baby being born, believing for a little while that a thing like that could actually change the world. If she spent enough time searching this guy out, maybe she'd get to church this year.

She slipped out through the kitchen, suggesting that the back door lock itself behind her. Then she headed downtown, trying to avoid the dirty slush piles on the sidewalk.

"Hey," said the bartender as she slipped into the Time-Out. "You got I.D., kid?"

Matt shrugged. "I didn't come in to order anything." She wasn't sure how old she was, but she knew it was more than twenty-one. Her close-cut hair, mid-range voice, and slight, sexless figure led people to mistake her for a teenage boy, a notion she usually encouraged. No one had formally identified her since her senior year of high school, years and years ago. "I just came to find a James Plainfield. He here?"

A man seated at the bar looked up. He was dressed in a dark suit, but his

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tie was emerald green, and his brown hair was a little longer than business-length. He didn't look like his driver's license picture, but then, who did? "Whatcha want?" he said.

"Wanted to give you your wallet. I found it in the street."

"Wha?" He leaned forward, squinting at her.

She walked to the bar and set his wallet in front of him, then turned to go.

"Hey!" he said, grabbing her arm. She decided maybe architecture built up muscles more than she had suspected. "You pick my pocket, you little thief?"

"Sure, that's why I searched you out to return your wallet. Put it in your pocket, Bud. The other pocket. I think you got a hole in your regular wallet pocket. The wallet doesn't like being out in the open."

His eyes narrowed. "Just a second," he said, keeping his grip on her arm. With his free hand he opened the wallet and checked the bulging currency compartment, then looked at the credit cards. His eyebrows rose. He released her. "Thanks, kid. Sorry. I'd really be in trouble without this."

"Yeah, that's what it said."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged, giving him a narrow grin and stuffing her hands deep into her pockets. He studied her, looking at the soaked shoulders of her jacket, glancing down at her battered boots, their laces knotted in places other than the ends.

"Hey," he said softly. "Hey. How long since you ate?"

"Lunch," she said. With all the people shopping, the trash cans in back of downtown restaurants had been full of leftovers after the lunch rush.

He frowned at his watch. "It's after nine. Does your family know where you are?"

"Not lately," she said. She yawned, covering it with her hand. Then she glanced at the wallet. "This the guy?"

—Yes, oh yes, oh yes, oh joy.—

"Good. 'Bye, Bud. Got to be getting home."

"Wait. There's a reward." He pulled out two fifties and handed them to her. "And you let me take you to dinner? And drive you home afterwards? Unless you have your own car."

She folded the fifties, slipped them into the battered leather card case she used as a wallet, and thought about this odd proposition. She squinted at the

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empty glass on the bar. "Which number are you?" she muttered to it, "and what were you?"

—I cradled an old-fashioned,— said the glass, —and from the taste of his lips, it was not his first.—

"You talking to my drink?" Amusement quirked the corner of his mouth.

Matt smiled, and took a peek at his dreamscape. She couldn't read thoughts, but she could usually see what people were imagining. Not with Plainfield, though. Instead of images, she saw lists and blueprints, the writing on them too small and stylized for her to read.

He said, "Look, there's a restaurant right around the corner. We can walk to it, if you're worried about my driving."

"Okay," she said.

He left some cash on the bar, waved at the bartender, and walked out, leaving Matt to follow.

The restaurant was a greasy spoon; the tables in the booths were topped with red linoleum and the menus bore traces of previous meals. At nine on Christmas Eve, there weren't many people there, but the waitress seemed cheery when she came by with coffee mugs and silverware. Plainfield drank a whole mugful of coffee while Matt was still warming her hands. His eyes were slightly bloodshot.

"So," he said as he set his coffee mug down.

Matt added cream and sugar, lots of it, stirred, then sipped.

"So," said Plainfield again.

"So," Matt said.

"So did you learn all my deep dark secrets from my wallet? You did look through it, right?"

"Had to find out who owned it."

"What else did you find out?"

"You carry a lot of cash. Your credit's good. You're real worried about your car, and you're an architect. There's two women in your life."

"So do we have anything in common?"

"No. I got no cash, — 'cept what you gave me — no credit, no car, no relationships, and I don't build anything." She studied the menu. She wondered if he liked young boys. This could be a pickup, she supposed, if he was the sort of man who took advantage of chance opportunities.

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The waitress came by and Matt ordered a big breakfast, two of everything, eggs, bacon, sausages, pancakes, ham slices, and biscuits in gravy. Christmas Eve dinner. What the hell. She glanced at Plainfield, saw him grimacing. She grinned, and ordered a large orange juice. Plainfield ordered a side of dry wheat toast.

"What do you want with me, anyway?" Matt asked.

He blinked. "I...I thought you must be an amazing person, returning a wallet like mine intact, and I wanted to find out more about you."

"Why?"

"You are a kid, aren't you?"

She stared at him, keeping her face blank.

"Sorry," he said. He looked out the window at the night street for a moment, then turned back. "My wife has my daughter this Christmas, and I..." He frowned. "You know how when you lose a tooth, your tongue keeps feeling the hollow space?"

"You really don't know anything about me."

"Except that you're down on your luck but still honest. That says a lot to me."

"I'm not your daughter."

He lowered his eyes to stare at his coffee mug. "I know. I know. It's just that Christmas used to be such a big deal. Corey and I, when we first got together, we decided we'd give each other the Christmases we never had as kids, and we built it all up, tree, stockings, turkey, music, cookies, toasting the year behind and the year ahead and each other. Then when we had Linda it was even better; we could plan and buy and wrap and have secrets just for her, and she loved it. Now the apartment's empty and I don't want to go home."

Matt had spent last Christmas in a shelter. She had enjoyed it. Toy drives had supplied presents for all the kids, and food drives had given everybody real food. They had been without so much for so long that they could taste how good everything was. Dreams came true, even if only for one day.

This year.... She sat for a moment and remembered one of the dreams she'd seen a couple of years ago. A ten-year-old girl thinking about the loving she'd give a baby doll, just the perfect baby doll, if she found it under the tree tomorrow. Matt could almost feel the hugs. Mm. Still as strong a dream as when she had first collected it. Yes! She had them inside her, and they still felt fresh.

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Food arrived and Matt ate, dipping her bacon in the egg yolks and the syrup, loving the citrus bite of the orange juice after the sopping, pillowy texture and maple sweetness of the pancakes. It was nice having first choice of something on a restaurant plate.

"Good appetite," said Plainfield. He picked out a grape jelly from an assortment the waitress had brought with Matt's breakfast and slathered some on his dry toast, took a bite, frowned. "Guess I'm not really hungry."

Matt smiled around a mouthful of biscuits and gravy.

"So," Plainfield said when Matt had eaten everything and was back to sipping coffee.

"So," said Matt.

"So would you come home with me?"

She peeked at his dreamscape, found herself frustrated again by graphs instead of pictures. "Exactly what did you have in mind, Bud?"

He blinked, then set his coffee cup down. His pupils flicked wide, staining his gray eyes black. "Oh. That sounds bad. What I really want, I guess, is not to be alone on Christmas, but I don't mean that in a sexual way. Didn't occur to me a kid would hear it like that."

"Hey," said Matt. Could anybody be this naive?

"You could go straight to sleep if that's what you want. What I miss most is just the sense that someone else is in the apartment while I'm falling asleep. I come from a big family, and living alone just doesn't feel right, especially on Christmas."

"Do you know how stupid this is? I could have a disease, I could be the thief of the century, I could smoke in bed and burn your playhouse down. I could just be really annoying."

"I don't care," he said.

She said, "Bud, you're asking to get taken." Desperation like his was something she usually stayed away from.

"Jim. The name's Jim."

"And how am I supposed to know whether you're one of these Dahmer dudes, keep kids' heads in your fridge?" She didn't seriously consider him a risk, but she would have felt better if she could have gotten a fix on his dreams. She had met some real psychos — their dreams gave them away — and when she closed dream-eyes, they looked almost more like everybody else than everybody else did.

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He stared down at his coffee mug, his shoulders slumped. "I guess there is no way to know anymore, is there?"

"Oh, what the hell," she said.

He looked at her, a slow smile surfacing. "You mean it?"

"I've done some stupid things in my time. I tell you, though..." she began, then touched her lips. She had been about to threaten him. She never threatened people. Relax. Give the guy a Christmas present of the appearance of trust. "Never mind. This was one great dinner. Let's go."

He dropped a big tip on the table, then headed for the cash register. She followed. "You have any...luggage or anything?"

"Not with me." She thought of her belongings, stowed safely in the basement two miles away.

"There's a drugstore right next to my building. We could pick up a toothbrush and whatever else you need there."

Smiling, she shook her head in disbelief. "Okay."

The drug store was only three blocks from the restaurant; they walked. Plainfield bought Matt an expensive boar-bristle toothbrush, asking her what color she wanted. When she told him purple, he found a purple one, then said, "You want a magazine? Go take a look." Shaking her head again, she headed over to the magazine rack and watched him in the shoplifting mirror. He was sneaking around the aisles of the store looking at things. Incredible. He was going to play Santa, and buy her a present. Kee-rist. Maybe she should get him something.

She looked at school supplies, found a pen and pencil set (the best thing she could think of for someone who thought in graphs), wondered how to get them to the cash register without him seeing them. Then she realized there was a cash register at both doors, so she went to the other one.

By the time he finished skulking around she was back studying the magazines. It had been years since she had looked at magazines. There were magazines about wrestlers, about boys on skateboards, about muscle cars, about pumping iron, about house blueprints, men's fashions, skinny women. In the middle of one of the thick women's fashion magazines she found an article about a murder in a small town, and found herself sucked down into the story, another thing she hadn't experienced in a long time. She didn't read often; too many other things to look at.

"You want that one?"

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"What? No." She put the magazine back, glanced at the shopping bag he was carrying. It was bulging and bigger than a breadbox. "You must of needed a lot of bathroom stuff," she said.

He nodded. "Ready?"

"Sure."

On the way into his fifth-floor apartment, she leaned against the front door and thought, —Are you friendly?—

—I do my job. I keep Our Things safe inside and keep other harmful things out.—

—I'm not really one of Our Things,— Matt thought. —I have an invitation, though.—

—I understand that.—

—If I need to leave right away, will you let me out, even if Jim doesn't want me to leave?–

The door mulled this over, then said, —All right.—

—Thanks.—She stroked the wood, then turned to look at the apartment.

She had known he had money — those gold cards, that cash. She liked the way it manifested. The air was tinted with faint scents of lemon furniture polish and evergreen. The couch was long but looked comfortable, upholstered in a geometric pattern of soft, intense lavenders, indigos, grays. The round carpet on the hardwood floor was deep and slate blue; the coffee table was old wood, scarred here and there. A black metal spiral plant-stand supported green, healthy philodendrons and Rabbit Track Marantas. Everything looked lived-in or lived-with.

To the left was a dining nook. A little Christmas tree decorated with white lights, tinsel, and paper angels stood on the dining table.

"I thought Linda was going to come," Plainfield said, looking at the tree. There were presents under it. "Corey didn't tell me until last night that they were going out of state. You like cocoa?"

"Sure," said Matt, thinking about her Christmas Eve dream, cocoa and other peoples' memories.

"Uh — what would you like me to call you?"

"Matt," said Matt.

"Matt," he said, and nodded. "Kitchen's through there." He gestured toward the dining nook. "I make instant cocoa, but it's pretty good."

Matt looked at him a moment, then headed for the kitchen.

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"Be there in a sec," said Jim, heading toward a dark hallway to the right.

—Cocoa?— she thought in the kitchen. Honey-pale wooden cupboard doors wore carved wooden handles in the shape of fancy goldfish, with inlaid gem eyes. White tiles with a lavender border covered the counters; white linoleum tiles inset with random squares of sky blue, rose, and violet surfaced the floor. A pale spring green refrigerator stood by the window, and a small green card table sat near it, with three yellow-cushioned chairs around it. Just looking at the room made Matt smile.

—Who are you?— asked the refrigerator as it hummed.

—A visitor.—

—Where's the little-girl-one who stands there and holds my door open and lets my cold out?—

—I don't think she's coming,— Matt said. She wasn't sure if a refrigerator had a time sense, but decided to ask. —How often is she here?—

—Every time Man puts ice cream in my coldest part. There's ice cream there now.—

Ah ha, Matt thought. She went to the stove, found a modern aqua-enameled tea kettle. —May I use you to heat water?— she thought at it.

—Yes yes yes!— Its imagination glowed with the pleasurable anticipation of heat and simmer and expansion.

She ran water into it, greeted the stove as she set the tea kettle on the gas burner, then asked the kitchen about mugs. A cupboard creaked open. She patted the door and reached inside for two off-white crockery mugs. A drawer opened to offer her spoons. The whole kitchen was giggling to itself. It had never before occurred to the kitchen that it could move things through its own choice.

—Cocoa?— thought Matt. The cupboard above the refrigerator eased open, and she could see jars of instant coffee and a round tin of instant cocoa inside, but it was out of her reach. She glanced at one of the chairs. She could bring it over —

—Hey!— cried the cocoa tin. She looked up to see it balanced on the edge of the refrigerator. She held out her hands and it dropped heavily into them, the cupboard door closing behind it.

"What?" Jim's voice sounded startled behind her.

She turned, clutching the cocoa, wondering what would happen now. Though she couldn't be sure, she got no sense of threat from him at all, and

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she was still in the heightened state of awareness she thought of as Company Manners. "Cocoa," she said, displaying the tin on her palms as though it were an award.

"Yeah, but — " He looked up at the cupboard, down at her hands. "But — "

The tea kettle whistled — a warbling whistle, like a bird call. The burner turned itself off just as Jim glanced toward it. His eyes widened.

—Chill,— Matt thought at the kitchen.

—Want warmth?— A baseboard heater made clicking sounds as its knob turned clockwise and it kicked into action.

—No! I mean, stop acting on your own, please. Do you want to upset Jim?—

—But this is — !— The concept it showed her was delirious joy. —We never knew we could do this!—

Matt sucked on her lower lip. She'd never seen a room respond to her this way. Some things were wide awake when she met them, and leading secret lives when no one was around to see. Other things woke up and discovered they could choose movement when they talked to her, but never before so joyfully or actively.

"What — " Jim said again.

Matt walked over to the counter by the stove, popped the cocoa tin's top with a spoon.

"Uh," said Matt.

"Can you — uh, make things move around without touching them?" His voice was thin.

"No," she said.

He blinked. Looked at the cupboard over the refrigerator, at the burner control, at the baseboard heater. He shook his head. "I'm seeing things?"

"No," said Matt, spooning cocoa into the mugs. She reached for the tea kettle, but before she could touch it, a pot holder jumped off a hook above the stove, gliding to land on the handle.

"Design flaw in the kettle," Jim said in a hollow voice. "Handle gets hot too."

"Oh. Thanks," she said, gripping the pot holder and the kettle and pouring hot water into the mugs. The spoon she had left in one mug lifted itself and started to stir. "Hey," she said, grabbing it.

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—Let me. Let me!—

She let it go, feeling fatalistic, and the other spoon lying on the counter rattled against the tiles until she picked it up and put it in the other mug. The sight of both of them stirring in unison was almost hypnotic.

"I've been reading science fiction for years," Jim said, his voice still coming out warped, "maybe to prepare myself for this day. Telekinesis?"

"Huh?" said Matt as she set the tea kettle back on the stove and hung up the pot holder.

"You move things with mind power?"

"No," she said.

"But — " The spoons still danced, crushing lumps of cocoa against the sides of the mugs, making a metal and ceramic clatter.

"I'm not doing it. They are."

"What?"

"Your kitchen," she said, "is very happy."

Cupboards clapped and drawers opened and shut. Somehow the sound of it all resembled laughter.

After a moment, Jim said, "I don't understand. I'm starting to think I must be asleep on the couch and I'm dreaming all this."

—Done,— said the spoons. Matt fished them out of the cocoa and rinsed them off.

"Okay," she said to Jim, handing him a mug.

"Okay what?"

"It's only a dream." —Thanks,— she thought to the kitchen, and headed out to the living room.

Jim followed her. She found coasters stacked on a side table and laid a couple on the coffee table, set her cocoa on one, then shrugged out of her coat and sat on the couch.

"It's only a dream?" Jim said, settling beside her.

"If that makes it easier."

He sipped cocoa. "I don't want easy. I want the truth."

"On Christmas Eve?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you one of Santa's elves, or something?"

She laughed.

"For an elf, you look like you could use a shower," he said.

"Even for a human I could."

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He fished the toothbrush out of his breast pocket and handed it to her. "Magic wand," he said.

"Thanks." She laid it on the table and drank some cocoa. She was so full from dinner that she wasn't hungry anymore, but the chocolate was enticing.

"All those things were really moving around in the kitchen, weren't they?" he said

"Yes," she said.

"Is the kitchen haunted?"

"Kind of."

"I never noticed it before."

She drank more cocoa. Didn't need other peoples' memories at the moment; making one of her own. She wasn't sure yet whether she'd want to keep this one or not.

Jim said, "Can you point to something and make it do what you want?"

"No."

"Just try it. I dare you. Point to that cane and make it dance." He waved toward a tall vase standing by the front door. It held several umbrellas and a wooden cane carved with a serpent twisting along its length.

"That's silly," she said.

"I've always, always wished I could move things around with my mind. It's been my secret dream since I was ten. Please do it."

"But I — " Frustrated, she set her mug on the table, but not before the coaster slid beneath it.

"See, look!" He lifted his mug, put it down somewhere else. His coaster didn't seem to care.

"But I — Oh, what the hell." —Cane? Do you want to dance?—

The cane quivered in the vase. Then it leapt up out of the vase and spun in the air like a propellor. It landed on the welcome mat, did some staggering spirals, flipped, then lay on the ground and rolled back and forth.

"That's so — that's so — "

She looked at him. His face was pale; his eyes sparkled.

"It's doing it because it wants to," she said.

"But it never wanted to before."

"Maybe it did, but it just didn't know it could."

He looked at the cane. It lifted itself and did some flips, then started tapdancing on the hardwood, somewhat muted by its rubber tip. "If every-

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Matt felt something melt in her chest, sending warmth all through her. She laughed.

thing knew what it could do — " he said. "Does everything *want* to do stuff like this?"

"I don't know," said Matt. "I've never seen things act like your things." She cocked her head and looked at him sideways.

With one loud tap from its head, the cane jumped back into the big vase and settled quietly among the umbrellas.

"I was wondering how you get things to stop," he whispered.

"Me too," she whispered back. "Usually things act mostly like things when I talk to them. They just act thing ways. Doors open, but they do that anyway. You know?"

"Doors open?" he said. His eyebrows rose.

She could almost see his thoughts. So: that's how this kid gets along. Doors open. She met his gaze without wavering. It had been a long time since she'd told anyone about talking to things, and other times she'd revealed it hadn't always worked out well.

"Doors open, and locks unlock," she said.

"Wow," he said.

"So," she said, "second thoughts about having me stay the night?"

"No! This is like the best Christmas wish I ever had, barring having Linda here."

Matt felt something melt in her chest, sending warmth all through her. She laughed.

He stared at her. "You're a girl," he said after a moment.

She grinned at him and set her mug on the coaster. "Could you loan me some soap and towels and stuff? I sure could use a shower now."

"You're a girl?"

"Mmm. How old do you have to be not to be a girl?"

"Eighteen," he said.

"I'm beyond girl."

"You're an elf," he said.

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She grinned. "Could I borrow something clean to sleep in?"

He blinked, shook his head. "Linda's got clothes here, in her old room. She's actually a little bigger than you now." He put his mug down and stood up. "I'll show you," he said.

She grabbed her new toothbrush and followed him down the little hall. He opened a linen closet, loaded her arms with a big fluffy towel and a washrag, then led her into a bedroom.

—Hello,— she thought to the room. It smelled faintly of vanished perfume, a flowery teen scent. All the furniture was soft varnished honey wood. The built-in bed against the far wall had wide dresser drawers below it and a mini-blind-covered window above. A desk held a small portable typewriter; bookshelves cradled staggering rows of paperbacks, and a big wooden dresser with chartreuse drawers supported about twenty stuffed animals in various stages of being loved to pieces. On the wall hung a framed photographic poster of pink ballerina shoes with ribbons; another framed poster showed different kinds of owls. Ice green wall-to-wall deep pile carpet covered the floor.

—You're not the one,— said the room.

—No, I'm not. The one isn't coming tonight. May I stay here instead? I won't hurt anything.—

—You can't have his heart,— said the room.

—All right,— said Matt. This room was not happy like the kitchen.

It relaxed, though.

—Thanks,— Matt thought.

Jim walked to the dresser and opened a drawer. "How do you feel about flannel?" he said, lifting out a nightgown. The drawer slammed shut, almost catching his hand, and successfully gripping the hem of the nightgown. "Hey!" he said.

—*Our* things,— said the room.

Matt thought about the sullen teenager she had seen in the photo in Jim's wallet. Afraid of losing things, holding them tight; Matt had learned instead to let go.

"Maybe you better put that back," she said. "I can rinse out my T-shirt."

Jim touched the drawer and it opened. He dropped the nightgown back in and the drawer snapped shut again. "I've got pajamas you can use. Actually, my girlfriend left some women's things in my closet...."

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"Pajamas would be good," Matt said.

He showed her the bathroom, which was spacious and handsome and spotless, black, white, and red tile, fluffy white carpet, combination whirlpool tub and shower, and a small stacked washer-dryer combination. "Wait a sec, I'll get you some pajamas. You want to do laundry?"

"Yeah," she said. "That'd be great." She wished she had the rest of her clothes with her, but they were still in the basement of that suburban house, two miles away. Oh well. You did what you could when the opportunity arrived.

He disappeared, returned with red satin pajamas and a black terrycloth robe.

"Thanks," she said, wondering what else he had in his closet. She hadn't figured him for a red satin kind of guy. She took a long hot shower without talking to anything in the bathroom, using soap and shampoo liberally and several times. The soap smelled clean; the shampoo smelled like apples. His pajamas and robe were huge on her. She hitched everything up and bound it with the robe's belt so she could walk without tripping on the pantlegs or the robe's hem. She brushed her teeth, then started a load of laundry, all her layers, except the coat, which she had left in the living room: T-shirt, long johns top and bottom, work shirt, acrylic sweater, jeans, two pair of socks, even the wide Ace bandages she bound her chest with. Leaving the mirror steamed behind her, she emerged, flushed and clean and feeling very tired but contented.

"I can't believe I ever thought you were a boy," Jim said, putting down a magazine and sitting up on the couch. Christmas carols played softly on the stereo. The mugs had disappeared.

"Very useful, that," said Matt.

"Yes," he said. She sat down at the other end of the couch from him. Sleep was waiting to welcome her; she wasn't sure how long she could keep her eyes open.

After a minute he said, "I went in the kitchen and nothing moved."

Matt frowned.

"Was it a dream?"

"Was what a dream?" she asked, before she could stop herself.

"Please," he said, pain bright in his voice.

"Do you want things dancing? Drawers closing on you?"

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He stared at her, then relaxed a little. "Yes," he said, "at least tonight I do."

She pulled her knees up to her chest and huddled, bare feet on the couch, all of her deep in the night clothes he had given her. She thought about it. "What happens is I talk to things," she said. "And things talk back. Like, I asked the kitchen where the cocoa was. Usually a thing would just say, this cupboard over here. In your kitchen, the cupboard opened itself and the cocoa came out. I don't know why that is, or why other people don't seem to do it."

"Like if I said, Hey, sofa, do you wanna dance?" He patted the seat cushions next to him.

—Sofa, do you want to dance?— Matt thought.

The couch laughed and said, —I'm too heavy to get around much. Floor and I like me where I am. I could....— And the cushions bounced up and down, bumping Matt and Jim like a trampoline.

Jim grinned and gripped the cushion he was sitting on. The couch stopped after a couple minutes. "But you did that, didn't you?" he said. "My saying it out loud didn't do anything."

"I guess not," Matt said.

"And things actually talk back to you?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Like my wallet."

"It kept whining about how you would die or at least be arrested without it. It really cares about you." She yawned against the back of her hand.

He fished his wallet out of his back pocket and stared at it for a minute, then stroked it, held it between his hands. "This is very weird," he said. "I mean, I keep this in my back pants pocket, and..." He flipped his wallet open and closed. He pressed it to his chest. "I have to think about this." He glanced at the clock on the VCR. "Let's go to sleep. It's already Christmas."

Matt squinted at the glowing amber digits. Yep, after midnight.

"Will you be okay in Linda's room?" Jim asked.

"As long as I don't steal your heart," Matt said and yawned again. Her eyes drifted shut.

"Steal my heart?" Jim muttered.

Matt's breathing slowed. She was perfectly comfortable on the couch, which was adjusting its cushions to fit around her and support her; but she felt Jim's arms lift her. She fell asleep before he ever let go.

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She woke up and stared at a barred ceiling. —Where is this?— she asked. Then she rolled her head and glanced toward the door, saw the ballerina toe shoes picture, and remembered: Linda. Jim.

The mini-blinds at the window above the bed were angled to aim slitted daylit at the ceiling. Matt could tell it was morning by the quality of the light. She sat up amid a welter of blankets, sheets, and quilt, and stretched. When she reached skyward, the satin pajama sleeves slid down her arms to her shoulders. She wasn't sure she liked being inside such slippery stuff, but she had been comfortable enough while asleep.

She reached up for the mini-blinds' rod and twisted it until she could see out the window. Jim's apartment was on the fifth floor. Across the street stood another apartment building, brick-faced, its windows mostly shuttered with mini-blinds and curtains, keeping its secrets.

She put her hand against the wall below the window. —Building, hello.—

—Hello, Parasite,— said the building, a deeper structure that housed all the apartments, all the rooms in the apartments, all the things in the rooms, all the common areas, and all the secret systems of wiring and plumbing, heating and cooling, the skeleton of board and girders and beams, the skin of stucco and the eyes of glass-lidded windows.

Parasite, thought Matt. Not a promising opening. But the building sounded cheerful. —How are you?— she thought.

—Warm, snug inside,— thought the building. —Freezing outside. Quiet. It won't last.—

—Oh, well, just wanted to say hi,— thought Matt.

—All right,— thought the building. She felt its attention turning away from her.

—Aren't you getting up now?— asked Linda's room. It sounded grumpy. —It's Christmas morning!—

—Oh. Right.— Matt slipped out of bed, pulled the big black robe around her, and ventured out into the hall, heading for the bathroom. Not a creature was stirring. She finished in the bathroom, then crept into the living room to check the clock on the VCR; it was around 7:30 a.m., a little later than her usual waking time. She peeked at the Christmas tree on the table in the dining nook. Its white lights still twinkled, and there were a couple more presents under it.

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—Coat?—she thought. It occurred to her that she had never talked to her own clothes before. Too intimate. Her clothes touched her all the time, and she wasn't comfortable talking to things that touched her anywhere but her hands and feet. If her clothes talked back, achieved self-will, could do whatever they wanted — she clutched the lapels of the black robe, keeping it closed around her. She would have to think about this. It wasn't fair to her clothes. —Coat, where are you?— she thought.

A narrow closet door in the hall slid open. Looking in, she saw that Jim had hung her coat on a hanger. She put out a hand and stroked the stained army-drab. Coat had been with her through all kinds of weather, kept her warm and dry as well as it could, hidden her from too close an inspection, carried all kinds of things for her. She felt an upwelling of gratitude. She hugged the coat, pressing her cheek against its breast, breathing its atmosphere of weather, dirt, Matt, and fried chicken (she had carried some foil-wrapped chicken in a pocket yesterday). After a moment warmth glowed from the coat; its arms slid flat and empty around her shoulders. She closed her eyes and stood for a long moment letting the coat know how much she appreciated it, and hearing from the coat that it liked her. Then she reached into the inside breast pocket and fished out the pen-and-pencil set she had bought the night before. With a final pat on its lapel, she slid out of the coat's embrace.

—Anybody know where I could find some wrapping paper and tape?— she asked the world in general.

The kitchen called to her, and she went in. A low, deep drawer near the refrigerator slid open, offering her a big selection of wrapping paper for all occasions and even some spools of fancy ribbons. Another drawer higher up opened; it held miscellaneous useful objects, including rubber bands, paperclips, pens, chewing gum, scissors, and a tape dispenser.

—Thanks,— she said. She chose a red paper covered with small green Christmas trees, sat at the card table with it and the tape, and wrapped up the writing set after she peeled the price sticker off it. Silver ribbon snaked across the floor and climbed up the table leg, then lifted its end at her and danced, until she laughed and grabbed it. It wound around her package, tied itself, formed a starburst of loops on top. She patted it and it rustled against her hand.

She put everything away and set her present under the tree, then went back to Linda's room and lay on the bed, yawning. The bed tipped up until she fell out.

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—It's Christmas morning,— it said crossly as she felt the back of her head; falling, she'd bumped it, and it hurt. —The one never comes back to bed until she's opened her presents!—

—I'm not the one,— Matt thought. —Thanks for the night.— She left the room, got her coat out of the closet, and lay on the couch with her coat spread over her. The couch cradled her, shifting the cushions until her body lay comfortable and embraced. She fell asleep right away.

The smell of coffee woke her. She sighed and peered over at the VCR. It was an hour later. A white porcelain mug of coffee steamed gently on a coaster on the table. She blinked and sat up, saw Jim sitting in a chair nearby. He wore a gray robe over blue pajamas. He smiled at her. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Matt said. She reached for the coffee, sipped. It was full of cream and sugar, the way she'd fixed it in the restaurant the night before. "Room service," she said. "Thanks."

"Elf pick-me-up." He had a mug of his own. He drank. "What are you doing out here?"

"The room and I had a little disagreement. It said it was time for me to wake up and open presents, like Linda, and I hadn't slept long enough for me."

He gazed into the distance. "Linda's always real anxious to get to the gifts," he said slowly. "She used to wake me and Corey up around six. Of course, we always used to hide the presents until Christmas Eve. We used to get a full-sized tree and set it up over there—" he pointed to a space in a corner of the room between bookshelves on one wall and the entertainment center on the other — "and we wouldn't decorate it until after she'd gone to sleep. So it was as if everything was transformed overnight. God, that was great."

"Magic," said Matt, nodding.

Jim smiled. Matt peeked at his dreamscape, and this time she could see the tree in his imagination, tall enough to brush the ceiling, glowing with twinkling colored lights, tinsel, gleaming glass balls, and Keepsake ornaments — little animals, little Santas, little children doing Christmas things with great good cheer —and here and there, old, much-loved ornaments, each different, clearly treasures from his and Corey's pasts. Beneath the tree, mounds of presents in green, gold, red, silver foil wrap, kissed with stick-on bows. Linda, young and not sullen, walking from the hall, her face alight as she looked at the tree, all of her beaming with wonder and anticipation so that for that brief moment she was the perfect creature, excited about the next moment and expecting to be happy.

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"Beautiful," Matt murmured.

"What?" Jim blinked at her and the vision vanished.

Matt sat quiet. She sipped coffee.

"Matt?" said Jim.

Matt considered. At last she said, "The way you saw it. Beautiful. Did Corey take the ornaments?"

"Matt," whispered Jim.

"The old ones, and the ones with mice stringing popcorn, and Santa riding a surfboard, and the little angel sleeping on the cloud?"

He stared at her for a long moment. He leaned back, his shoulders slumping. "She took them," he said. "She's the custodial parent. She took our past."

"It's in your brain," Matt said.

He closed his eyes, leaned his head against the seat back. "Can you see inside my brain?"

"Not usually. Just when you're looking out at stuff, like the tree. And Linda. And I'm not sorry I saw those things, because they're great."

He opened his eyes again and peered at her, his head still back. "They are great," he said. "I didn't know I remembered in such detail. Having it in my brain isn't the same as being able to touch it, though."

"Well, of course not." She thought about all the dreams she had seen since she first woke to them years before. Sometimes people imagined worse than the worst: horrible huge monsters, horrible huge wounds and mistakes and shame. Sometimes they imagined beautiful things, a kiss, a sharing, a hundred musicians making music so thick she felt she could walk on it up to the stars, a sunset that painted the whole world the colors of fire, visions of the world very different from what she saw when she looked with her day-eyes. Sometimes they just dreamed things that had happened, or things that would happen, or things they wished would happen. Sometimes people fantasized about things that made her sick; then she was glad that she could close her dream-eyes when she liked.

All the time, people carried visions and wishes and fears with them. Somehow Matt found in that a reason to go on; her life had crystallized out of wandering without destination or purpose into a quest to watch peoples' dreams, and the dreams of things shaped by people. She never reported back to anyone about what she saw, but the hunger to see more never lessened.

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She had to know. She wasn't sure what, or why.

"In a way, ideas and memories are stronger than things you can touch," she said. "For one thing, much more portable. And people can't steal them or destroy them — at least, not very easily."

"I could lose them. I'm always afraid that I'm losing memories. Like a slow leak. Others come along and displace them."

"How many do you need?"

He frowned at her.

She set down her coffee and rubbed her eyes. "I guess I'm asking myself: how many do I need? I always feel like I need more of them. I'm not even sure how to use the ones I've got. I just keep collecting."

"Like you have mine now?"

"My seeing it didn't take it away from you, though."

"No," he said. He straightened. "Actually it looked a lot clearer. I don't usually think in pictures."

"Mostly graphs and blueprints," Matt said.

He tilted his head and looked at her.

"And small print I can't read."

"Good," he said. After a moment's silence, he said, "I would rather you didn't look at what I'm thinking."

"Okay," she said. For the first time it occurred to her that what she did was spy on people. It hadn't mattered much; she almost never talked to people she dreamwatched, so it was an invasion they would never know about. "I do it to survive," she said.

"Dahmer dudes," he said, and nodded.

"Right. But I won't do it to you anymore."

"Thanks. How about a pixie dust breakfast?"

"Huh?"

"Does the kitchen know how to cook?"

She laughed and they went to the kitchen, where he produced cheese omelets, sprinking red paprika and green parsley on them in honor of Christmas. He had to open the fridge, turn on the stove, fetch the fry-pan himself, but drawers opened for Matt as she set the table, offering her silver and napkins, and a pitcher jumped out of a cupboard when she got frozen orange juice concentrate out of the freezer, its top opening to eat the concentrate and the cans of water. She had never before met such a coopera-

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tive and happy room. Her own grin lighted her from inside.

Jim's plates were egg-shell white ceramic with a pastel geometric border. He slid the omelets onto them and brought breakfast to the table. She poured orange juice into square red glass tumblers, fetched more coffee from the coffee-maker's half-full pot, and sat down at the green table.

"I'm so glad you're here," Jim said.

"Me too," said Matt.

"Makes a much better Christmas than me quietly moping and maybe drinking all day."

Matt smiled and ate a bite of omelet. Hot fluffy egg, cheese, spices greeted her mouth. "Great," she said after she swallowed.

Jim finished his omelet one bite behind Matt. She sat back, hands folded on her stomach, and grinned at him until he smiled back.

"Presents," she said.

"That was my line. Also I wanted to say having you here is the best present I can think of, because all my life I've wanted to see things move without being touched. It makes me so happy I don't have words for it."

"Did you design this kitchen?"

He glanced around, smiled. "Yeah. I don't do many interiors, but I chose everything in here, since I like to cook. Corey did the living room and our bedroom."

"This kitchen moves more than any other place I've ever been. I think it was almost ready to move all by itself. I bet your buildings would like to take a walk. I wonder if they're happy. I bet they are."

He sat back and beamed at her. Then he reached for his coffee mug and it slid into his hand. His eyes widened. "Matt...."

She shook her head.

"Gosh. You *are* an elf." He sipped coffee, held the mug in front of him, staring at it. He stroked his fingers along its smooth glaze. He looked up at Matt. "It's beautiful," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Everything is."

For a long time they stared at each other, their breathing slow and deep. At last he put the mug down, but then curled his fingers around it as though he couldn't bear to let go.

"Everything?" he said.

"Mmm," she said. For a moment she thought of ugly dreams, and sad

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dreams, and wondered if she believed what she had just said. Some things hurt so much she couldn't look at them for long. Still, she wanted to see them all. Without every part, the balance was missing. Jim's image of a Christmas Linda was intensified by how much he missed her. Cocoa tasted much better on a really cold day, and a hug after a nightmare could save a life....

After a moment, she said, "I got you something." She stood up. He stood up too, and followed her into the dining nook. She picked up the parcel she had wrapped that morning and offered it to him. "I had to, uh, borrow the paper."

"How could you get me anything?" he said, perplexed. "These are for you." He handed her three packages. "I didn't know what to get you." He shrugged.

"Dinner, cocoa, conversation, a shower, laundry, a place to sleep, coffee, breakfast," she said. She grinned and took her packages to the couch, where she shoved her coat over and sat next to it. "Thanks," she said.

He joined her.

She opened the first present, uncovered a card with five die-cast metal micro-cars attached, all painted skateboard colors: hot rods with working wheels. Delighted, she freed them from their plastic and set them on the coffee table, where they growled and raced with each other and acted like demented traffic without ever going over the edge.

Jim sat gripping his present, watching the cars with fierce concentration. "I got them for the teenage boy," he said in a hushed voice after a moment. Two of the cars seemed to like each other; they moved in parallel courses, looping and reversing. One of the others parked. The two remaining were locked bumper to bumper, growling at each other, neither giving an inch.

Matt laughed. "They're great! They can live in my pocket." She patted her coat. "Open yours."

He touched the ribbon on his package and it shimmered with activity, then dropped off the package and slithered from his lap to the couch, where it lifted one end as if watching. Eyebrows up, he slid a fingernail under the paper, pulled off the wrapping. He grinned at the pen and pencil, which were coated with hologram diffraction grating in magenta and teal, gold and silver. "The office isn't going to know what hit it," he said. "Thanks."

"I bought 'em for the architect with a green tie. Not a whole lot of selection in that store."

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"Yeah," he said, tucking them into the pocket of his robe. "Go on." He gestured toward the other two presents.

She opened the first one and found a purple knit hat. The second held a pair of black leather gloves. She slid her hands into them; they fit, and the inner lining felt soft against her palms. "Thanks," she said, her voice a little tight, her heart warm and hurt, knowing he had bought them for the homeless person. She smiled and leaned her cheek against the back of her gloved hand. "Best presents I've gotten in years."

"Me too," he said, holding out a hand to the silver ribbon. It reached up and coiled around his wrist. He breathed deep and stroked the ribbon. "God!"

Matt tucked the hat and gloves into a coat pocket, patted the coat, held out a hand to the little cars. They raced over and climbed up onto her palm. "Look," she said, turning over her coat. "Here's your new garage." She laid the coat open and lifted the inner breast pocket so darkness gaped. The cars popped wheelies off her hand and zipped into the cave. One peeked out again, then vanished. She laughed. She had laughed more in the last twelve hours than she had in a whole month.

The phone rang, and Matt jumped. Jim picked up a sleek curved tan thing from a table beside the couch and said, "Merry Christmas" into it.

Then, "Oh, hi, Corey!"

Hugging her coat to her, Matt stood up. She could go in the other room and change while he talked to his ex-wife. Jim patted the couch and smiled at her and she sat down again, curious, as ever, about the details of other peoples' lives.

"Nope. I'm not drunk. I'm not hungover. I'm fine. Missing Linda, that's all....okay, thanks."

He waited a moment, his eyes staring at distance, one hand holding the phone to his ear and the other stroking the silver ribbon around the phone-hand's wrist. "Hi, Hon. Merry Christmas! You having fun?"

A moment.

"I miss you too. Don't worry, your presents are waiting. When you get home we can have a mini-Christmas. I hope you're someplace with snow in it. I know how much you like that...oh, you are? Great! Snow angels, of course. What'd your mom get for you?"

Matt thought about family Christmases, other peoples' and then, at last, one of her own — she hadn't visited her own memories in a long long time.

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Her older sister Pammy sneaking into her room before dawn, holding out a tiny wrapped parcel. "Don't tell anybody, Mattie. This is just for you," Pammy had said, and crept into bed beside her and kissed her. Matt opened the package and found inside it a heart-shaped locket. Inside, a picture of her as a baby, and a picture of Pammy. Matt had seen the locket before — Pammy had been wearing it ever since their mother gave it to her on her tenth birthday, four years earlier. Only, originally, it had had pictures of Mom and Dad in it.

"I'll never tell," Matt had whispered, pressing the locket against her heart.

"It's supposed to keep you safe," Pammy said, her voice low and tight. "That's what Mom told me. It didn't work for me but maybe it will for you. Anyway, I just want you to know...you have my heart."

And Matt had cried the kind of crying you do without sound but with tears, and she didn't even know why, not until several years later.

"That's great," Jim said, smiling, his eyes misty. "That's great, Honey. Will you sing one for me when you get home? Yeah, I know it will feel funny to sing a carol after Christmas is over, but we're doing a little time warp, remember? Saving a piece of Christmas for later...

"Me? I thought I was going to miss you so much I wasn't going to have any fun, but I found a friend, and she gave me a couple presents. No, not Josie! You know she's at her folks'. I know you don't like it if she's here when you come, so we set it up before I knew you weren't..." He glanced at Matt and frowned, shrugged. "No, this is a kid. Actually, an elf."

He smiled again. "I wish you could have been here. She made the kitchen dance and the couch dance. I gave her these little cars, because I thought she was a boy, and she made them run all over the coffee table even though they don't have motors in them. I think she works for Santa Claus."

Matt slipped her hand into a coat pocket and touched the hat he had given her. It was soft like cashmere. Maybe *he* worked for Santa Claus. It had been a long time since she had had a Christmas of her own instead of borrowing other peoples', and this was the first one she could remember where she was actually really happy.

"You're too old to believe in Santa?" he said. He sighed. "I thought I was, too, but I'm not anymore." He listened, then laughed. "Okay, call me silly if you like. I'm glad you're having a good Christmas. I love you. I'll see you when

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you get back." He laid the phone down with a faint click.

Matt grinned at him. She liked thinking of herself as an elf and an agent of Christmas. Better than thinking she must be some kind of charity project for Jim, the way she had been at first.

Stranger still to realize she was having a no-peek Christmas, alone in her own head.

She thought of families, and, at long last, of her sister Pammy. How many years had it been? She didn't even know if Pam were still alive, still married to her first husband, if she had kids....

"Can I use that?" she said. He handed the phone to her. She dialed information.

"What city?"

"Seattle," she said. "Do you have a listing for Pam Sternbach?"

There was a number. She dialed it.

"Merry Christmas," said a voice she had not heard since she had lived at home, half a life ago.

"Pam?"

"Mattie! Mattie? Omigod, I thought you were dead! Where are you? What have you been doing? Omigod! Are you all right?"

For a moment she felt very strange, fever and chills shifting back and forth through her. She had reached out to her past and now it was touching her back. She had put so much distance between it and herself. She had walked it away, stamped it into a thousand streets, shed the skin of it a thousand times, overlaid it with new thoughts and other lives and memories until she had thousands to choose from. What was she doing?

"Mattie?"

"I'm fine," she said. "How are you?"

"How am I? Good God, Mattie! Where have you been all these years?"

"Pretty much everywhere." She reached into the coat's breast pocket and fished out one of the little cars, watched it race back and forth across her palm. She was connecting to her past, but she hadn't lost her present doing it. She drew in a deep breath, let it out in a huge sigh, smiled at Jim, and snuggled down to talk.

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F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 62

Only about 25 people understood the rules for this Competition. The misunderstanding was, obviously, our fault for giving such poor directions. The result was an amusing hodgepodge of items that bore almost no relation to each other. Once the Competition Editors relaxed ("No one followed the rules. No one followed the *rules!*"), we had a lot more fun. Oh, what were those rules? Let us quote from the August issue: "Paul Newman sells salad dressing, popcorn, and spaghetti sauce. What would science fiction writers sell if they went into another business? (Well, Harlan Ellison would sell angry candy.)" What we *intended* was that participants would use titles in their answers. What we *received* was everything from characters to comments on the writers' lifestyles. Since the result was so varied, we developed two criteria for choosing the winners: the answers had to be creative and, more importantly, they had to make us laugh.

FIRST PLACE goes to **Anita and Mike Allen** of Roanoke, Virginia (who also managed to sneak in an Honorable Mention (see below) — yes, the same Mike who took second last competition), for this all-inclusive shopping experience:

Come on down to Mindfields Mini Mall (H. Ellison, Realtor) and meet our World Fantasy Award-Winning Sales Team:

Italo Calvino at If on a Winter's Night a Travel Agency, for a vacation story that's never finished...

Clive Barker, promoter for the Great and Secret Show Cinema 6 Multiplex...

Patricia McKillip, proprietor of the Forgotten Beasts of Eld exotic pet shop chain...

Robert R. McCammon, owner of Swan Song Records (and stockholder for *Boy's Life* Magazine)...

Michael Moorcock, vending Eternal Champion Spark Plugs: "fire up again and again through infinite incarnations"...

Peter Straub, spokesman for Koko Puffs, a real cereal killer...

Robert Holdstock, dealer for Mythago Wood Furniture: "In style since the dawn of pre-history"...

Kristine Kathryn Rusch, vendor

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for Heart Readers Gift Shop, for gifts that unveil what's in your heart to that special someone...

SECOND PLACE goes to **Bernard J. de la Cruz** of San Diego, CA, whose entries show a nesting mood:

Building a house? Come to Asimov's Construction Company for the best Foundations in the galaxy.

Fine metal etching for your cyberpunk art and wetware chips at Burning Chrome (Wm. Gibson, Proprietor).

Of course, Ray Bradbury Winery (Established Greentown, Mars) would produce Dandelion Wine, a nostalgic melange exactly one-half inspiration and one-half terror. (The 1928 and 2002 vintages are especially fine.)

The RUNNERS-UP all gave us multiple chuckles. First we have entries from **Lesa Neace** of Whitesburg, KY:

Kim Stanley Robinson sells red and green Mars M&Ms during the Christmas season.

Isaac Asimov runs a foster home for ugly little boys.

Jules Verne is a tour guide on a journey to the center of the earth.

Our second RUNNER-UP, **James Williamson** of Omaha, NE adds these products to our list:

Thomas Disch, a businessman, sells brave little toasters.

Daniel Keyes sells flowers, for Algernon.

And our third RUNNER UP is **Joshua Horowitz** of North Caldwell, NJ:

Harlan Ellison sells "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" toothbrushes.

William Gibson sells Virtual Lightbulbs.

And finally, the HONORABLE MENTIONS:

Frank's Dune Buggies (run by Frank Herbert): Thrill to the feel of the wind in your hair and sand in your teeth. It'll add spice to your life.
—**David S. Smiley**
Tallahassee, FL

James Tiptree Jr. Antiperspirant ("Named for a man, but made by a woman").
—**Caroline A. Hayes**
Up. Montclair, NJ

No time for laundry? Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time 24-hour Laundromat: "Take it home dry before you even arrive."
—**Anita & Mike Allen**
Roanoke, VA

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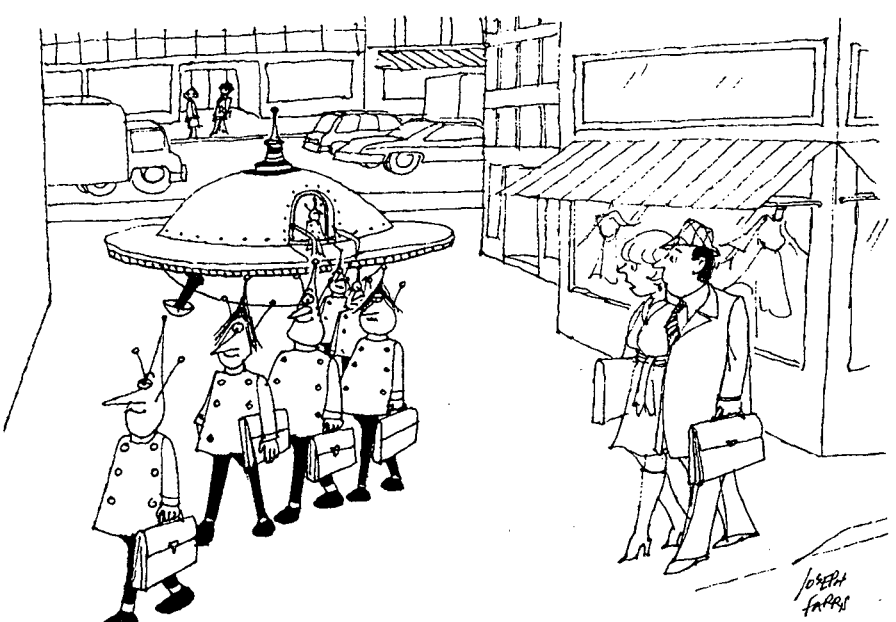
COMPETITION 63 (suggested by Mark Ditoro)

IT CAME FROM THE B MOVIE THEATER:
Hollywood has a tendency to retitle the stories it films to make them sound more interesting. Thus Bradbury's "The Fog Horn" became *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* became *The Brain Eaters* Invent an exciting (and funny) title for a movie version of any sf or fantasy work.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Road, W. Cornwall, CT 06796. Entries must be received by January 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

PRIZES: First prize, eight different hardcover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different SF paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 63 will appear in the May issue.



"As if global competition wasn't bad enough..."

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Coming Attractions

Just in case this winter has been short on the ice and snow, artist **Terry Smith** has added to our winter chill with his cover for "Tirkiluk" by Ian MacLeod. "Tirkiluk" is set in the Artic during World War II. Science Officer Seymour has been sent to monitor a weather station in Tuiak Bay. He believes he is alone until someone breaks into his storage shed. Then he sees a ragged human figure running across the frozen beach — and his strange encounter with Tirkiluk begins.

The February issue isn't all ice and terror, however. **Mike Resnick** and **Nicholas A. DiChario** liven things up with the story of an unusual King fallen on hard times. "Working Stiff" is the story of the best bus driver on the downtown line, and the reason he fights off reporters from movie magazines. The answer, of course, is not at all what anyone would suspect.

And finally, we welcome another old friend back to these pages. **Jack Williamson** returns with a science fiction novelette. "Dark Star" is based on *The Black Sun*, the novel Jack is currently writing. Carlos Mondragon comes from a poor town in Chihuahua. He taught himself computer skills, and stowed away on a quantum ship to escape a world with no room for him. And now, as the ship lands on a frigid planet with no hope of life, he faces his grandest adventure yet....

In future issues, we'll have stories by our book reviewer **Charles de Lint**, and *F&SF* favorite **Robert Reed**. **Ray Bradbury** makes a return appearance with a touching ghost story, and so does **Esther M. Friesner** with one of the most frightening sf stories you will read all year. Expect cover stories from **R. Garcia y Robertson**, **Marcos Donnelly**, and **Ian MacLeod** (again!), as well as humor from **Steve Perry**, **Jerry Oltion**, and **Kent Patterson**. We have a holiday ad inserted in the pages of the magazine. Seek it out for your last chance at special subscription rates.

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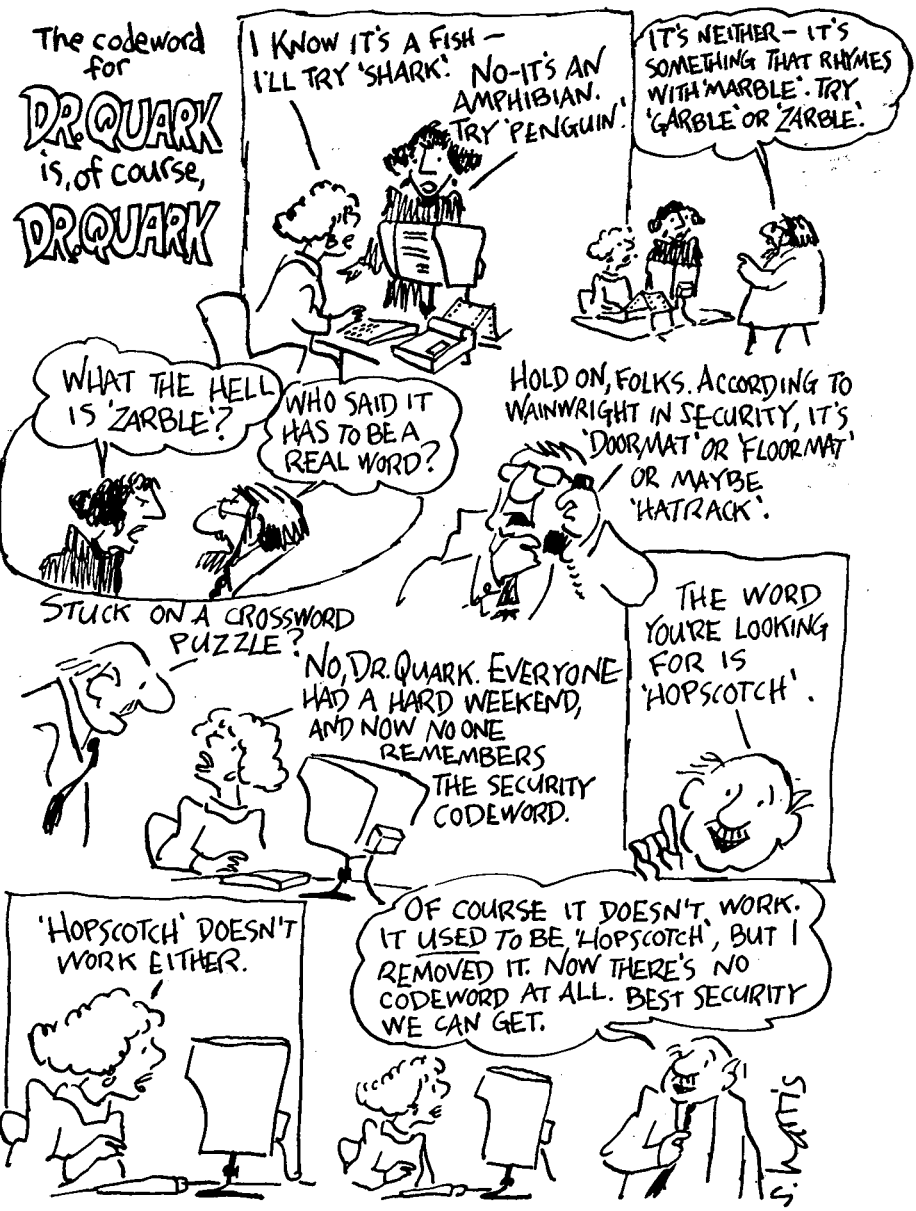
The codeword for DR. QUARK is, of course, DR. QUARK
I KNOW IT'S A FISH — I'LL TRY 'SHARK'. NO-IT'S AN AMPHIBIAN. TRY 'PENGUIN'.
IT'S NEITHER — IT'S SOMETHING THAT RHYMES WITH 'MARBLE'. TRY 'GARBLE' OR 'ZARBLE'.
WHAT THE HELL IS 'ZARBLE'?
WHO SAID IT HAS TO BE A REAL WORD?
HOLD ON, FOLKS. ACCORDING TO WAINWRIGHT IN SECURITY, IT'S 'DOORMAT' OR 'FLOORMAT' OR MAYBE 'HATRACK'.
STUCK ON A CROSSWORD PUZZLE?
NO, DR. QUARK. EVERYONE HAD A HARD WEEKEND, AND NOW NO ONE REMEMBERS THE SECURITY CODEWORD.
THE WORD YOU'RE LOOKING FOR IS 'HOPSCOTCH'.
'HOPSCOTCH' DOESN'T WORK EITHER.
OF COURSE IT DOESN'T WORK. IT USED TO BE 'HOPSCOTCH', BUT I REMOVED IT. NOW THERE'S NO CODEWORD AT ALL. BEST SECURITY WE CAN GET.

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